

Skin, Surface and Subjectivity:  
The Self-Representational Photography of Francesca Woodman

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## Abstract

This thesis examines Francesca Woodman's self-representational photography, not as a project of self-portraiture, but a means of exploring the relationship between self and objectified image through a re-staging of the drama of the photographic medium's process on her own skin.

I re-situate Woodman's work within 1970s art practice by examining her relationship to performance, body art and photography, in order to disrupt the strictures of existing psycho-biographical interpretations. I also address the ways in which Woodman stages photographic dialogues with a diversity of historical precedents, from photographic contemporaries of the period, from the nineteenth-century, Surrealist photography, and from American modernist practice.

The first chapter concentrates on Woodman's best known photographs, addressing the problems of the existing literature, and how in this series Woodman uses the technique of blurring to make reference to archaic photographic practice, as a haunting of the medium staged through an artful 'stretching' of the print's surface and temporal fabric. The second chapter considers Woodman's description of 'skin' in her photography, and the ways in which she performs a subject in the process of formation or breakdown. The third chapter concentrates on Woodman's reconfiguration of the photographic 'crop' as she re-situates the process in the moment of framing, excising her own face and subjectivity in a kind of 'self-cutting' which dramatises the medium's own language of implicit violence. The fourth chapter discusses an unpublished artist's book, in which Woodman's own skin is the support for a sequential act of disappearance. By re-enacting the photographic moment of the negative, the series alludes to the process of self-absenting on which representation depends. The final chapter examines Woodman's use of masking and repetition to re-enact within the single shot the photograph's status as copy, and the ways in which the imaged subject is always split and doubled in representation.

## Contents

List of Illustrations .....	4
Acknowledgements .....	11
Introduction: A Fugitive Testimony .....	14
1: Photography's Haunted Spaces: the 'House' Series .....	36
2: Second Skins .....	71
3: Delicate Cutting .....	101
4: A Disappearing Act .....	128
5: Behind the Mask: Repetition and Inter-subjective Space .....	159
Bibliography .....	203
Illustrations .....	223



## List of Illustrations

**Frontispiece** Francesca Woodman, *Self-Portrait Talking to Vince*  
gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978

### Chapter 1

- Fig. 1.1 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print,  
Providence, Rhode Island, 1976-1976
- Fig. 1.2 Francesca Woodman, *House #3*,  
gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1976
- Fig. 1.3 Francesca Woodman, *House #4*,  
gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1976
- Fig. 1.4 Francesca Woodman, double page spread from *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, 1981 (published by Synapse Press, Philadelphia)
- Fig. 1.5 Clementina Hawarden, untitled photograph,  
c. 1861-1863, Victoria & Albert Museum, London
- Fig. 1.6 Man Ray, *Untitled (Lee Miller's Torso)*, gelatin silver print, 1931
- Fig. 1.7 Clementina Hawarden, *Untitled (Clementina Maude)*,  
c. 1861-1862, Victoria & Albert Museum, London
- Fig. 1.8 Clementina Hawarden, untitled photograph,  
c. 1861-1862, Victoria & Albert Museum, London
- Fig. 1.9 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print,  
Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978
- Fig. 1.10 Francesca Woodman, from the *Self-Deceit* series,  
gelatin silver print, Rome, May 1977-August 1978
- Fig. 1.11 Francesca Woodman, from the *Self-Deceit* series,  
gelatin silver print, Rome, May 1977-August 1978
- Fig. 1.12 Clementina Hawarden, untitled photograph,  
c. 1862-1863, Victoria & Albert Museum, London
- Fig. 1.13 Martha Rosler, still from *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, video, 6 minutes,  
black and white, with sound, 1975
- Fig. 1.14 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print,  
Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978



- Fig. 1.15 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Portrait of My Mother-in-Law*  
gelatin silver print, c. 1957-1958
- Fig. 1.16 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Untitled (Guy Mendes in three roles, multiple exposure)*, gelatin silver print, c. 1968-1970
- Fig. 1.17 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Untitled (Two Ghosts with Fireplace)*,  
gelatin silver print, c. 1969
- Fig. 1.18 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Untitled (Michael and Christopher outside brick building)*, gelatin silver print, 1960
- Fig. 1.19 Francesca Woodman, from the *On Being An Angel* series,  
gelatin silver print, Rome, September 1977
- Fig. 1.20 Duane Michals, *Death Comes to the Old Lady*, sequence of black and white photographs, 1969
- Fig. 1.21 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print,  
Boulder, Colorado, 1972-1975
- Fig. 1.22 Francesca Woodman, *Polka Dots*,  
gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978
- Fig. 1.23 Clementina Hawarden, untitled photograph,  
c. 1862, Victoria & Albert Museum, London
- Fig. 1.24 Julia Margaret Cameron, *Thomas Carlyle*,  
collodion print, 1867, George Eastman House, Rochester, New York

## Chapter 2

- Fig. 2.1 Francesca Woodman, *Space Squared*,  
gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1976
- Fig. 2.2 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print,  
Rome, May 1977-August 1978
- Fig. 2.3 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print,  
Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978
- Fig. 2.4 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print,  
MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire, Summer 1980
- Fig. 2.5 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print  
New York City, 1979-1980
- Fig. 2.6 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print,  
New York City, 1979-1980

- Fig. 2.7 Aaron Siskind, *Providence*, gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976
- Fig. 2.8 Aaron Siskind, *Homage to Franz Kline (Jalapa 45)*, gelatin silver print, 1973
- Fig. 2.9 Aaron Siskind, *New York 63*, gelatin silver print, New York, 1976
- Fig. 2.10 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978
- Fig. 2.11 *Capitoline Venus*, Roman copy of a Hellenistic original, c. 120 B.C.E., Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy
- Fig. 2.12 Hannah Wilke, from *S. O. S. Starification Object Series* gelatin silver prints, series of black and white photographs, 1972-1982
- Fig. 2.13 Hannah Wilke, details of *S.O. S. Starification Object Series*
- Fig. 2.14 Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 144 black and white photographs, 18 x 12.5 cm each, 1973, Collection, Art Institute of Chicago
- Fig. 2.15 Sue Madden, photograph of performance of *Chrysalis* (1974) in *Studio International*, 1976
- Fig. 2.16 Francesca Woodman, *Then at one point I did not need to translate the notes: they went directly to my hands*, gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, c.1976
- Fig. 2.17 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978
- Fig. 2.18 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, c.1976

### Chapter 3

- Fig. 3.1 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Boulder, Colorado, 1972-1975
- Fig. 3.2 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Boulder, Colorado, 1972-1975
- Fig. 3.3 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, New York, 1979-1980
- Fig. 3.4 Hans Bellmer, *Unica*, gelatin silver print, 1958

- Fig. 3.5 Hans Bellmer, *Unica*, gelatin silver print, 1958
- Fig. 3.6 Hans Bellmer, *Unica*, gelatin silver print, 1958
- Fig. 3.7 Hans Bellmer, *Unica*, gelatin silver print, 1958
- Fig. 3.8 Hans Belmer, *Unica*, reproduced on the cover of *Le Surréalisme, même*, no. 4 (Spring 1958)
- Fig. 3.9 Francesca Woodman, *Horizontale*, gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976-1977
- Fig. 3.10 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Boulder, Colorado, 1972-1975
- Fig. 3.11 Paul Strand, *Torso, Taos, New Mexico*, gelatin silver print, 1930
- Fig. 3.12 Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe, A Portrait (Torso)*, gelatin silver print, 1918
- Fig. 3.13 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1976
- Fig. 3.14 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1976
- Fig. 3.15 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978
- Fig. 3.16 Ana Mendieta, *Glass on Body*, performance related photographs, University of Iowa, Iowa, January-March 1972
- Fig. 3.17 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1976
- Fig. 3.18 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1976

## Chapter 4

- Fig. 4.1 Francesca Woodman, first page from *Portrait of a Reputation*, gelatin silver print on card, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1979
- Fig. 4.2 Francesca Woodman, second page from *Portrait of a Reputation*, gelatin silver print on card, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1979
- Fig. 4.3 Francesca Woodman, third page from *Portrait of a Reputation*, gelatin silver print on card, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1979



- Fig. 4.4 Francesca Woodman, fourth page from *Portrait of a Reputation*, gelatin silver print on card, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1979
- Fig. 4.5 Francesca Woodman, final page from *Portrait of a Reputation*, gelatin silver print on card, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1979
- Fig. 4.6 Man Ray, *Érotique voilée*, gelatin silver print, 11 x 6.9 cm, 1933, private collection, Paris
- Fig. 4.7 Man Ray, image from the *Érotique voilée* series, Meret Oppenheim and Louis Marcoussis, gelatin silver print, 1933
- Fig. 4.8 Man Ray, image from the *Érotique voilée* series, Meret Oppenheim and Louis Marcoussis, gelatin silver print, 1933
- Fig. 4.9 Man Ray, image from the *Érotique voilée* series, Meret Oppenheim, gelatin silver print, 1933
- Fig. 4.10 Man Ray, image from the *Érotique voilée* series, Meret Oppenheim and Louis Marcoussis, gelatin silver print, 12.6 x 16.8 cm, 1933, private collection, Paris
- Fig. 4.11 Man Ray, image from the *Érotique voilée* series, Meret Oppenheim, (uncropped version), gelatin silver print, 1933
- Fig. 4.12 Man Ray, image from the *Érotique voilée* series, Meret Oppenheim (cropped version), gelatin silver print, 16.8 x 12.7 cm, 1933, private collection, Paris
- Fig. 4.13 Francesca Woodman, *Horizontale*, gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976-1977
- Fig. 4.14 Anonymous photograph of a bronze glove, included in André Breton's *Nadja* (1928)
- Fig. 4.15 Max Klinger, *Handlung* (Action), etching (plate: 29.9 x 21 cm, image: 24.8 x 18.9 cm), from *Paraphrase über den Fund eines Handschuhes* (Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove), 1881, National Gallery of Victoria, Australia
- Fig. 4.16 Max Klinger, *Ruhe* (Repose), etching (plate: 14.3 x 26.8 cm, image: 11.1 x 23.4 cm), from *Paraphrase über den Fund eines Handschuhes* (Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove), 1881, National Gallery of Victoria, Australia
- Fig. 4.17 Max Klinger, *Amor* (Cupid), etching (plate: 14.2 x 26.7 cm, image: 11 x 23.8 cm), from *Paraphrase über den Fund eines Handschuhes* (Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove), 1881, National Gallery of Victoria, Australia

- Fig. 4.18 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Rome, 1977-1978
- Fig. 4.19 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Rome, 1977-1978
- Fig. 4.20 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Rome, 1977-1978
- Fig. 4.21 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Rome, 1977-1978
- Fig. 4.22 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Rome, 1977-1978
- Fig. 4.23 Francesca Woodman, *Compositione*, gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976-1977
- Fig. 4.24 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, New York, 1979-1980
- Fig. 4.25 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976
- Fig. 4.26 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976

## Chapter 5

- Fig. 5.1 Man Ray, *Alice B Toklas and Gertrude Stein*, photograph included as the frontispiece to the 1933 edition of Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head)
- Fig. 5.2 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978
- Fig. 5.3 Diane Arbus, *Untitled (4)*, gelatin silver print, 1970-1971
- Fig. 5.4 Inge Morath, untitled gelatin silver print, published in Saul Steinberg's *Le Masque* (Paris: Maeght Editeur, 1966)
- Fig. 5.5 Inge Morath, untitled gelatin silver print, published in Saul Steinberg's *Le Masque* (Paris: Maeght Editeur, 1966)
- Fig. 5.6 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Boulder, Colorado, 1972-1975
- Fig. 5.7 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, New York, 1979
- Fig. 5.8 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, gelatin silver print, 1968-1971, from *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* (published 1974)
- Fig. 5.9 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Lucybelle Crater and her 46-year-old husband Lucybelle Crater*, gelatin silver print, 1968-1971, from *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* (published 1974)

- Fig. 5.10 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Lucybelle Crater and Close Friend Lucybelle Crater in the Grape Arbor*, gelatin silver print, c. 1971, from *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* (published 1974)
- Fig. 5.11 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976
- Fig. 5.12 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978
- Fig. 5.13 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, New York, c. Spring 1980
- Fig. 5.14 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, New York, c. Spring 1980
- Fig. 5.15 Francesca Woodman, *Self-Portrait at Thirteen*, gelatin silver print, Boulder, Colorado, 1972-1975
- Fig. 5.16 Cindy Sherman, *Bus Riders*, series of 15 gelatin silver prints, Buffalo, New York, 1976
- Fig. 5.17 Walker Evans, *Subway Portrait*, gelatin silver print, New York, 1938-1941
- Fig. 5.18 Walker Evans, mocked-up double page spread for *The Passengers*, 1959
- Fig. 5.19 Walker Evans, *Subway Portrait*, gelatin silver print, New York, 1938-1941
- Fig. 5.20 Francesca Woodman, study for the *Temple Project* series, gelatin silver print, New York, Spring 1980
- Fig. 5.21 Francesca Woodman, untitled gelatin silver print, New York, c. 1980



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I would like to dedicate my work to the loving memory of my Grandma

Ruby Violet Bulman (1912-2003)

who would have been so proud

Image removed due to third party copyright

Francesca Woodman, *Self-Portrait Talking to Vince*, 1977-1978



## Introduction

### A Fugitive Testimony

There is a passage in a novel by Jean Rhys entitled *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), in which the story's central female character experiences a moment of intense self-awareness. The young heroine, having just arrived in London from the West Indies, finds herself ill at ease and out of place. Experiencing a displaced sense of self, as if seeing herself from outside of her subject position, Anna describes this moment of self-objectification, remembering that:

“It was like letting go and falling back into water and seeing yourself grinning up through the water, your face like a mask, and seeing the bubbles coming up as if you were trying to speak from under the water. And how do you know what it's like to try to speak from under water when you're drowned?”<sup>1</sup>

I came across this passage as I sat in the reading rooms of the New York Public Library, and was immediately struck by the way in which Rhys' words could be appropriated to create an eloquent caption for a photograph taken by Francesca Woodman at around the age of eighteen (see the frontispiece to this thesis). Although I had seen this particular photograph many times during my research on Woodman's work, until that moment I had not paid that much attention to it. But on that day, I had just come from a meeting with George Woodman, the artist's father, at his Chelsea home.<sup>2</sup> During this interview, George had told me how precociously well-read his daughter had been: how she had loved the work of Colette and Gertrude Stein, of Proust and Henry James, and how she had also been absorbed by the novels of Jean Rhys. Centred on isolated and often melancholy female characters, women who felt themselves to be out of place or

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, originally published by Constable, 1934 (this edition, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969, p. 84).

<sup>2</sup> I am very grateful to the artist's parents, George and Betty Woodman, for allowing me access to Francesca's entire body of photographs. George has been particularly supportive of my work, and has offered his memories and insights on his daughter's work on a number of occasions by telephone and during my archival research trips to New York in March 2001 and April 2002. He was kind enough to invite me into his home, where I was able to see a number of vintage prints hand-produced by Woodman before her death. Due to the fragility of her photographs, and the fact that she usually made only one or perhaps two prints from her negatives (a number of which were then lost or destroyed), the nearly six hundred images she produced have been digitally archived. This archive includes early work she produced whilst still at high school and during her degree at RISD; work produced in Rome as part of the European exchange program at RISD; the prints made whilst artist-in-residence at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire during the summer of 1980; the collection of fashion-related photographs from New York after her graduation; the studies and blueprints she made as part of the 'Temple Project' she began shortly before her death; and her artist's books, including the unpublished *Portrait of a Reputation* (discussed in chapter four of this thesis), and *Some Disordered Interior*

somehow remote from their surroundings and life around them, Rhys' tales of regret and loss captured the imagination of the young photographer.

Although such resonant echoes of loss and memory are interwoven within any photograph, throughout her career Woodman used her camera to capture her own image undergoing a process of disappearance, as if a subject in flight. But in this example, the artist draws attention to another aspect of the photographic medium, as she seems to have tried to depict the way in which the subject becomes an object of representation in the precise moment of portrayal. Picturing herself with her head tilted back and her chin held up, Woodman appears as if struggling to bring her mouth to the surface of the image. From the dark interior of her opened jaws protrudes the strangely distorted form of a glass object, its icy glint appearing like a succession of watery bubbles rising up from the depths. As if trying to speak from under water, with her voice encapsulated in cold, hard bubbles of solidified air, Woodman's photograph captures her face as a mask. Acting out a moment of devastating self-awareness similar to the one described by Rhys' words, Woodman's self-representation makes visible a moment in which the artist seems to look back onto herself in an instant of drastic dissociation.

Woodman gave this photograph the title of *Self-Portrait Talking to Vince*.<sup>3</sup> That she gave it a title at all is interesting, as nearly all of Woodman's photographs were originally untitled, although a few have subsequently had titles imposed upon them during the process of organising and archiving her work after her death. But the fact that she used the term 'self-portrait' is even more unusual, as Woodman used that self-referential title for just two of her photographs. In the body of nearly six hundred photographs she produced over her short career, the overwhelming majority depict some aspect of Woodman's own image. The frequency with which she took herself as her subject suggests at first that she considered her project to be one of self-portrayal. But rather than being a serially accumulated set of photographic self-portraits through which Woodman aimed to express some spurious notion of an 'essential' self, Woodman's repeated acts of self-representation were instead motivated by a concern to explore the process through which any sense of 'self' is always displaced from the image.

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*Geometries*, a book which was published by the Synapse Press, Philadelphia, just before her suicide in January 1981.



Typically, this photograph is not a simple self-portrait in which the artist attempts to express something about her subjectivity or identity through the capturing of the features of her face, or the specificities of her visual appearance. Whilst the knubs and pills of her pale woollen sweater provide the background to offset the detail of the silver pendant encircling her neck, elements of her own costume which are carefully recorded in the crisp detail of the photograph, the portrait-like pose of the shot is upset by the glassy object which floats from her open mouth. Her hooded, scrutinizing gaze and strained facial expression upset the formality of such a pose, and, as if trying to break free from the surface of the photograph whose glossy sheen it echoes, the glass object floats in the space of representation. Formed by a drip of molten glass rapidly cooled, the object's curved arcs and loops resemble the whorls of hand-writing, re-iterating the system of language invoked by the photograph's title. Capturing herself 'talking', Woodman stages her self-image in a moment of communication and exchange, in which her words are frozen, immobilised in the instant in which they take flight from her lips. Like a crystallised breath, Woodman's photograph fixes this moment of communication, petrifies it, and condenses the medium of interaction and meaning into a stilled but fragile materiality. By making visible this moment of inter-subjective exchange, Woodman's prop seems analogous to the photograph itself, as it freezes and materialises a kind of passage in time. As the unseen photographer behind the camera, and the subject whose image is captured by its exposing action, Woodman becomes both subject and object of the image, a fragmented presence between whose disparate parts that moment of crystallised communication hovers. As if both uniting and dividing the strands of her own subject position, the glass object, like the photograph itself, bears witness to that moment in time in which she made herself the object of visual representation.

In *Camera Lucida*, a tale of photography haunted by loss and longing, Roland Barthes describes this moment as a "very subtle moment" of transition, in which the "strange action" of the photographic portrait is carried out on its subject. In this moment of self-loss, which he describes as a "micro-version of death", Barthes experiences himself as neither "subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object".<sup>4</sup> Figuring a presence whose own image is the visual evidence of this moment of self-loss, the

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that the passage in Rhys' text is provoked by Anna's reading of a letter sent to her by a character named Vincent; it is possible that Woodman's title makes a direct reference to this text.



photograph is a “fugitive testimony” to a fleeting subjectivity. It is this moment of transition that Woodman’s photographs seem to capture or replay. But rather than structuring a field in which photographer and model negotiate that process of objectification, by using herself as her subject, the artist’s act is confined within a solipsistic framework. By repeatedly training her camera on herself, Woodman’s project of objectification is self-imposed, her artistic act one which brings to representation the process of splitting which is a condition of existence.

From the very earliest photographs she produced, Woodman showed a concern for the problematic nature of self-representation. Her own image appears over and over again within the archive of her photographs, the obsessive subject of the imagery she produced over the ten year period of her photographic career. Born in 1958 to her artist parents—the ceramicist Betty and painter-turned-photographer George—Francesca grew up in Boulder, Colorado, and began to take photographs at around the age of thirteen. This interest was developed when she attended the Abbott Academy boarding school in Andover, Massachussets, where she was inspired by her photography teacher Wendy Snyder MacNeill.<sup>5</sup> Already an accomplished photographer, Woodman undertook the BFA programme at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1975, where she encountered illustrious photographers such as Aaron Siskind, who was a professor at the college. Often collaborating with her colleague Sloan Rankin, and using her as a model whose image becomes the artist’s own double, Woodman’s body of college work is largely one of self-imaging. Woodman spent part of the final year of her studies in Rome as she took a place in the European exchange programme run by the college, where she spent a lot of time at the *Maldoror* bookshop, and encountered many of the Surrealist publications and images with which she remained fascinated throughout her career. After graduating from RISD that autumn, Woodman moved to New York City, and began to piece together a number of portfolios to send to various fashion

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<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida – Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 14. Barthes’ text was originally published in French as *La Chambre Claire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> See the biographical notes in Hervé Chandès (ed.), *Francesca Woodman* (Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain & Zurich-Berlin-New York: Scalo, 1998), p. 54. Even at this early age Woodman seemed aware of her own idiosyncratic photographic style and the pressing desire she had to find her own subjective voice. On the back of on an early print Woodman had sent home as a letter to her mother, she pointed out that the photograph is “a picture of Wendy – (my style)”, whilst alluding to another shot which is “more Wendy style”. The print depicts her tutor and appears to be a double-exposure, showing Woodman’s desire to experiment with the medium. Although Woodman made few double-exposures later on in her career, this early use of the technique seems a precursor to the ways in which Woodman experimented with the themes of doubling, repetition and seriality within the confines of the straight,

photographers. As a great admirer of the fashion photography of Deborah Turbeville, Woodman tried to secure a position as the photographer's assistant, but was unsuccessful in this venture, although she did occasionally work for other photographers.<sup>6</sup> During this period, Woodman produced a large number of 'fashion' type shots, using friends and colleagues, or newly professional models eager to offer their services for free in return for Woodman's prints. In the summer of 1980 Woodman acquired the position of artist-in-residence at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, where she produced and developed a huge body of photographs. Many of these have natural themes, and were taken outside, contrasting with the more usual use of the domestic interior as the stage-setting for her work. Returning to New York in the autumn, Woodman began work on her large-scale project of classically-inspired blueprints which began to form the 'Temple Project' series. At the beginning of 1981, one of Woodman's artist's books, entitled *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, was published by the Synapse Press, Philadelphia, just before her suicide on 19 January.

The frequency with which Woodman photographed herself at first suggested that her project should be considered as an obsessive search for the expression of some kind of essential self or identity, but as I studied a number of her original vintage prints at her parents' home, and on the digitally recorded archive of her entire body of work, this notion of simple self-representation was put under pressure. As if drawing attention to the transitional moment of objectification described by Barthes, Woodman's self-imposed acts of representation make clear the way in which the subject of the image is manipulated by the medium's processes. The resulting self-representations become fraught with the drama of an explicitly photographic mode of image-making, as Woodman's own image becomes subjected to its implied 'violence'. Flattened by the rectilinear field deep within the camera's shadowed chamber, skewed and strangely moulded by the lens' distorting perspective, decapitated by the negative's framing edge, or blurred into indistinction by its reproductive light, the artist's self-image becomes ensnared within the operations of the medium. By using her image—and so the material body to which that image claims an intimate connection—as the surface upon which this exploration or re-enaction of this photographic process is staged,

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unmanipulated shot throughout her career. Aware of both her mentor's influence, and her own developing talent, she claimed she had to "try to keep everyone happy."



Woodman's repeated act of self-representation frames her exploration of the medium itself. Using her body as a stage, and her skin as the surface on which the drama of objectification is somehow played out, Woodman's imagery exposes the processes, manipulations, distortions and elisions to which the self is subjected in a project of photographic self-representation.

In this thesis, I would like to suggest that in a number of Woodman's shots, the photographic medium itself becomes the subject of the image, the precarious subject undergoing the inherently othering process of objectification. As it is brought into its own field of representation, moments of the medium's process, its techniques, its history, and its implications for subjectivity are laid bare by the artist's camera. Using herself to act out or re-stage these moments and concepts, Woodman's photographs are bound up with the labour and temporality of their own production. By manipulating light to figure herself in hazy blur, Woodman seems to inscribe her own photographs with a history of outmoded practice, her movement during long exposure times producing a ghostly effect which recalls the attenuated period of exposure necessary in early photography. Rarely cropping her photographs, Woodman's careful framing before the moment of exposure visualises that process, and draws attention to the implicit 'violence' such photographic techniques suggest when applied to the body, in which the photograph becomes a 'cut' in the spatio-temporal fabric of the world. Often capturing herself in a moment of disappearance, as if evacuating the frame of representation, Woodman drew attention to the way in which the positive image is produced out of absence, the shadow cast on the surface of the negative. And by using serial imagery and repeated motifs, Woodman's body of work is haunted by her frequent use of female figures which become her own doubles, a cast of feminine subjects acting out the photograph's potentially endless reproducibility and its status as an essentially displaced copy.

In thinking about these themes in relation to Woodman's figuring of an ambiguous feminine presence—often faceless, blurred, or decapitated by the image's framing edge—Peggy Phelan's theorisation of the photograph as a space haunted by feminine absence has been very useful. I am particularly interested in the way Phelan makes use of Luce Irigaray's discussion of the feminine as the embodiment of the 'not-masculine'

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, in conversation (New York, April 2002) George Woodman could not remember the

to align the photograph's own negative state to feminine subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> Whilst Phelan notes the way in which any positive print is haunted by its own suppressed and feminised underside, I would like to suggest that in Woodman's positive prints, these covertly concealed moments of process are paradoxically brought to light. However, by examining the ways in which Woodman used her own body to act out these moments, I do not want to suggest that she offers her own presence, but rather that her photographs offer the invitation to such an encounter that is always ultimately denied. As such, my interpretation of Woodman's self-representation has been framed by the work of Phelan, and also by Amelia Jones' re-examination of the 'body art' practices contemporaneous to Woodman's own period of artistic production.

Jones' exploration of the period was prompted by Rosalind Krauss' important 1977 essay 'Notes on the Index', an essay which mapped the indexical status of both performative body art and its relationship to the photographic document.<sup>8</sup> Jones puts the promise of the indexical presence seemingly offered by such body-related acts under pressure, pointing out that the artist's gesture and the photograph are mutually supplementary: the performative gesture needs the photograph in order to confirm its occurrence, and the photograph needs the body in order to anchor its indexical claim to reality. I have tried to put that questioning of the nature of indexical representation in a dialogue with an explicitly photographic practice, to examine not only the ways in which Woodman's performative photography is implicated within a similar set of concerns, but also to suggest that some of the performative practices with which she was undoubtedly engaged are also involved with the problems specific to photography. Rather than acting out a notion of an essential self, or the expression of a spurious artistic subjectivity seemingly offered by the originary gesture of the performative act, Woodman performs photography itself, in an act which is retro-actively constituted in the moment of viewing.

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name of the photographers for whom Francesca worked.

<sup>7</sup> See Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked – The Politics of Performance* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 70; and Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), (originally published in French as *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> See Amelia Jones, *Body Art – Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, MN, & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index', Parts 1 & 2, *October* 3 & 4 (Spring and Fall 1981).



There are some obviously performative aspects to many of Woodman's photographs. As Phelan has noted, the portrait-photograph is unavoidably performative, as the subject always enacts a sense of self for the camera, becoming the object Barthes described.<sup>9</sup> Acting out a self-imposed role for her own camera, Woodman invested her self-representations with theatrical elements, as she carefully selected clothing and props from her ever-expanding wardrobe of second-hand clothes and hoarded found objects. Her idiosyncratic style of dress spills over into the frames of her photographs, infusing her imagery with the traces of a quirky and artfully produced identity. Each of her images is highly staged, and it was her usual working method to produce detailed sketches and meticulous plans of how she envisaged her final prints. But it is perhaps by using herself as her model that a more clearly performative aspect is expressed: usually using a timer rather than a cable release, Woodman seemed to have had to hurry to take up her position, the movement of her body from behind the camera into the field under its gaze often recorded as a whispery blur. Framed by the timer's whirring countdown, Woodman's original gestures are both traced, and diffused, by the photograph's exposing light.

By frequently configuring the photograph's relationship to her body as one that is tenuous, or fragile, in which a subject is captured in flight, as if slipping from its surface, Woodman draws attention to the way in which the subject always evades the frame of photographic representation. Using the terms of the medium to draw attention to this evasion or disappearance—by re-situating the cropping edge onto her body, by diffusing her image by the light on which the photograph's visualisation depends, or by manipulating its status as a copy or reproduction of that subject so as to confuse any notion of the 'original'—Woodman's work bears witness to a performative act, but it is described within a photographic language in which its claim to 'truth' is questioned.

By interpreting Woodman's practice within the theoretical framework constructed by Jones and Krauss, I have been able to re-locate Woodman's work not only within a contemporaneous theoretical framework, but also to re-forge some connections with the artistic practice of the period, a context from which her work has undergone continual displacement in the body of literature that has grown since her work was released for public viewing. After her death in 1981, Woodman's work was not shown until 1986,

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<sup>9</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 35.



when the first major solo exhibition of her photographs was organised by Ann Gabhart and Rosalind Krauss at the Wellesley College Museum, Wellesley, and the Hunter Art Gallery in New York, in a show which reached a geographically diverse audience as it toured several other galleries in North America over a period of a year. As critic Dave Beech has pointed out, it is tempting to consider that the popularity of Woodman's work owes much to the fact that she seems to be a figure on whom "fate or fashion or Rosalind Krauss smiled", and the exposure of her work has been greatly enhanced by the sophistication of the essays which were included in the catalogue published to accompany this exhibition.<sup>10</sup> Containing Krauss' 'Problem Sets' and Abigail Solomon-Godeau's 'Just Like a Woman', this catalogue remains the most influential body of literature on Woodman's work to date. As Margaret Sundell has recently suggested, the fact that both Krauss and Solomon-Godeau have subsequently chosen to reprint their essays in recent collections of their respective writings has secured the artist's position within the history of women's photographic practices, and opened up her body of work to a much wider academic audience.<sup>11</sup>

Solomon-Godeau's use of feminist theory as an interpretative tool in her essay has persisted as the most influential reading of Woodman's photography, but there are some limitations in her text that I hope to have addressed.<sup>12</sup> According to Solomon-Godeau,

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<sup>10</sup> Dave Beech, 'Francesca Woodman', review of exhibition at The Photographer's Gallery, London from 6 August to 18 September 1999, published in *Art Monthly*, no. 230 (October 1999), p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> See Margaret Sundell's contribution to the round-table discussion of Woodman's photography which was recently published as 'Francesca Woodman Reconsidered: A conversation with George Baker, Ann Daly, Nancy Davenport, Laura Larson, and Margaret Sundell', in *Art Journal*, vol. 62, no. 2 (Summer 2003), p. 54. Krauss' essay 'Problem Sets' was originally published in *Francesca Woodman, Photographic Work* (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Museum & New York: Hunter College Art Gallery, 1986), and reprinted in a collection of her writings on female artists entitled *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1999); Solomon-Godeau's essay 'Just Like a Woman' (also included in the Wellesley catalogue) was included in her collection *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Solomon-Godeau's use of feminist theory as the tool to interpret Woodman's iconography of the female body has been criticised. The artist's father remains adamant that Woodman was not consciously motivated by a political commitment: the personal and highly subjective distaste for such an interpretation that he expressed during conversation is echoed in some of the reviews that have been written since the publication of Solomon-Godeau's influential text. For example, Mary Ellen Haus, reviewing the show for which Solomon-Godeau's essay was written, offers the opinion that Woodman's voice is stifled by Solomon-Godeau's "feminist appreciation" of the artist's work, forcing the photography to fit the strictures of a personal agenda as the writer has "tread too close to the line between interpretation and manipulation." The essential femininity with which Woodman's photography seems by some feminists indelibly inscribed is problematic for some male critics: for example, in his essay 'Roads of Access to Francesca Woodman's Work', Harm Lux admitted the "trepidation" he felt approaching her body of photography with a "male bias", and solved this problematic block by trying to adopt what he described as a "female perspective". See Mary Ellen Haus' review 'Francesca Woodman, Hunter College Art Gallery', published in *Artnews*, vol. 85, no. 4 (April 1986), p. 168; and Harm Lux, 'Roads of



the body of five or six hundred photographs the artist produced over her short career is the work of a "prodigy", a rare enough phenomenon, but almost unheard of in the field of photographic practice by women. As such a prodigy, Woodman's work is "particularly difficult to place", and this perceived difficulty is borne out by Solomon-Godeau's text as she extricates Woodman's practice from the context of 1970s art.<sup>13</sup> Although Solomon-Godeau notes that by using herself as her model Woodman's photography makes use of a representational device shared by artists such as Cindy Sherman and Hannah Wilke, she does not follow up this connection, choosing instead to make links between Woodman's figuration of the female body and slightly later work produced by artists informed by feminism. By including Barbara Kruger's *We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture* from 1982 in her essay, Solomon-Godeau not only extricates Woodman's exploration of femininity from the context of 1970s body-related practices with which it seems to have more in common, but also invests her practice with a similarly (albeit covert) political agenda. George Baker, in the recent round-table discussion in which the photographer's practice has been reconsidered, has noted the way in which Solomon-Godeau's reading of Woodman is viewed through the lens of 1980s art practice, a period informed by critical theory, and also a period in which the post-modern strategies of appropriation and quotation deemed absent in Woodman's photographs were being explored.<sup>14</sup> For whilst Solomon-Godeau argues that Woodman's imagery of the female body works to draw attention to the way in which femininity is always constructed rather than innate or essential, and draws upon traditions of representation in order to deflate their power, she also suggests that Woodman's photographic acts of reclamation and appropriation are devoid of the "grim ironies or cool detachment" which characterise post-modern photographic practices by artists such as Kruger or Sherman.<sup>15</sup> Uncomfortably lodged within 1980s art practice, Woodman's work is made homeless, and displaced from its moment of making.

Whilst Solomon-Godeau's interpretation has been very useful to me, as she interprets the photographer's use of her own "youthful, beautiful" image as a strategy through which attention is drawn to the fact that there is no 'real' or essential femininity outside

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Access to Francesca Woodman's Work', included in the exhibition catalogue *Francesca Woodman* (Zurich: Shedhalle & Münster: Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1992), pp. 14 & 15.

<sup>13</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Just like a Woman' in *Photography at the Dock*, p. 240.

<sup>14</sup> See George Baker's contributions to the round-table discussion of Woodman's work in 'Francesca Woodman Reconsidered', p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> Solomon-Godeau, 'Just like a Woman', p. 242.



of representation, I have tried to relate Woodman's use of herself as her subject to more contemporary models of artistic practice. Some other critics and reviewers writing in the wake of Solomon-Godeau's text have picked up on connections to contemporaneous art practices, but usually in order to draw attention to the ways in which Woodman's work remains distanced or distinct. Similarities to the work of Cindy Sherman are often noted: Frederick Ramey describes how both Woodman and Sherman draw attention to the gendered position and gaze of the spectator, whilst Faye Hirsch notes how Woodman, like Sherman, is never the true subject of her photographs, which instead only ever depict her image, her double.<sup>16</sup> Kathryn Hixson forges a connection to more explicitly feminist practices, relating Woodman's photographs to some 1970s American artists who used the image of the female body in order to explore questions of identity through an interplay of the body and their chosen medium, and gives as her examples the paintings of Nancy Spero and the videos of Eleanor Antin.<sup>17</sup> A relationship to the work of Ana Mendieta is noted by Franklin Sirmans, who interprets some of Woodman's photographs as records of private performances, making a connection between the two which is also noted by Jen Budney.<sup>18</sup> Although Budney worryingly interprets both women's work as visual evidence of their shared desire for a kind of return to origin which cannot help but invoke both artists' untimely deaths, Budney does also suggest that Woodman's project of self-representation must be examined in the light of feminist practices of artists such as Antin, Wilke and Carolee Schneemann.<sup>19</sup> In these artists' practices, Budney recognises how the use of the naked female form might be problematic, and asks how it can be visualised without becoming further objectified. Woodman's work, however, is interpreted as "intensely personal rather than symbolic", her imagery of self a diaristic expression of subjectivity rather than the vehicle through which such a questioning of the conventions of photographic representation might be staged.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Frederick Ramey, 'Francesca Woodman', review of exhibition at The Galleries, University of Colorado, Boulder, in *New Art Examiner*, vol. 14, no. 10 (June 1987), p. 58; and Faye Hirsch, 'Odd Geometry: the Photography of Francesca Woodman', *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, vol. 25, no. 2 (May-June 1994), p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Hixson actually gives the name Elizabeth Antin, but this is assumed to be a typographical error. See her essay 'Essential Magic: The Photographs of Francesca Woodman' in *Francesca Woodman* (Zurich: Shedhalle & Münster: Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1992), p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Franklin Sirmans, 'Francesca Woodman', review of exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York published in *Time Out New York*, August 5-12, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> See Jen Budney, *Francesca Woodman* (Modena: Galleria Civica, 1996), p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



I will address these connections, and hope to re-forge some links to the contemporaneous practices of some of these artists, as I discuss Woodman's use of the body in photography to projects by Hannah Wilke, Eleanor Antin, Ana Mendieta and Cindy Sherman.<sup>21</sup> The work of all of these artists, produced during the same period of the 1970s, is informed by feminism, and takes as its subject the idea of self-representation. Whether seemingly narcissistic and exhibitionist as in the case of Wilke, masked and artificially constructed in the work of Sherman, or used as the site of a more obviously conceptually-provoked critique in the work of Antin and Mendieta, the problematic relationship of the self to the image was undergoing extensive examination. Whilst I relate Woodman's project to these examples of performance-related practice, I have also placed these examples in reciprocal dialogue with Woodman's more explicitly photographic practice, in order to suggest that the photographic medium was itself being brought to representation.

By doing this, I hope to also re-situate the work of Woodman (and the photographic work of Mendieta and Sherman) within a temporal moment in which attention was turned to the photographic medium itself. Woodman's work, although performative, is explicitly photographic, and I want to examine how her work is not only inevitably informed by a history of photography, but also actively engaged with addressing some of the medium's limits and possibilities. Whilst Solomon-Godeau states that Woodman's work has "not much in common" with the art photography of the period, or the formalist styles favoured by art institutions such as RISD, I will consider Woodman's use of the medium as being both imbricated within contemporaneous projects through which it was being explored, and inextricably intertwined with its own

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<sup>21</sup> Whilst these allusions to the contemporary art world from which Woodman's work emerged do make connections to some female artists working at the time, the important role that performance-related photography and body art held for Woodman has been more or less overlooked. Having been brought up by artist parents and interacting with their artist friends from a young age, Woodman developed her precociously mature practice within a highly charged creative environment. George Woodman could not offer any evidence of Francesca's commitment or admiration of any particular performance artist working at the time, but remains convinced that her photographic project cannot be interpreted outside of that frame of reference. George remembered one incident that took place whilst Francesca was still at high school in Andover, in which the young artist became involved in collaborative project for the school's 'Class of '74' yearbook. To create the photographic cover, some of the students arranged a dawn shoot in which a number of students sneaked out of their dormitories, stripped off their clothes, and lay down to form the words 'Mother Phillips' (a reference to the name of the school, Phillips Academy) with their naked bodies. Under the supervision of the instigator, Steve Miller, thirty young students got into position whilst he tripped the shutter to take the shot, which was eventually included in the yearbook as a loose flyleaf. According to George Woodman, Francesca was one of the key figures in this collaborative production, although her name is not mentioned in Miller's account of the event. I am very grateful to



history.<sup>22</sup> In my own reading, I hope to re-forge some of lost connections to both contemporaneous and historical photographic practices, and examine the way in which her photography can be read as both a site of resistance and reformulation. For example, I argue that Woodman's imagery of the female nude is thoroughly embedded within the historical codes of representation at the heart of American formalist photographic practice, and that her work not only reveals her awareness of this precedent, but also appropriates those codes in order to draw attention to their covert meanings. Not so much a critique of the photographers working within that system of representation, but a critique of the way in which the photographic medium is itself a means through which meaning is fixed, identity lost and subjectivity de-formed, Woodman's work could be read as a post-modern project of appropriation and de-familiarisation.

But more than this, I want to suggest that by making the photographic process and its related concepts and terms the object of her representational practice, I will also reveal how Woodman's project exemplifies a moment in late 1970s photographic practice. As Max Kozloff (a critic whom Woodman met in the late 1970s and an early supporter of her photography) stated in 1976, at this moment a generation of young photographers were becoming more and more interested in "how the photograph sees than what it sees".<sup>23</sup> At odds with the straight style of her professors such as Siskind, Woodman's method of exploring and exposing the process of image-making itself also resonates with the critical framework in which photography was being interpreted at the time. Best exemplified in the pages of a special issue of the journal *October* from 1978 dedicated to photographic practice, critical attention turned to contemporary and

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Ruth Quattlebaum, the archivist at Phillips Academy, Andover, for providing me with a copy of Miller's own account, which he sent to the school for archiving on June 8, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau does offer one shaky precedent, stating that if Woodman's work recalls another representational practice "even superficially, it might be surrealist photography" ('Just Like a Woman', p. 242). Whilst Woodman would have undoubtedly had access to Surrealist material at RISD, she also developed a friendship with the collector Timothy Baum in New York, who owns a number of Surrealist photographs and images, and during her year in Rome, Woodman frequented the *Maldoror* bookshop where she encountered many Surrealist texts. Susan Rubin Suleiman has subsequently strengthened this somewhat tentative connection, as she places Woodman's work within an inter-generational dialogue with Surrealist practice, particularly in the imagery of the female body produced by André Breton, Hans Bellmer and René Magritte. Relating Woodman's frequent use of the female image to the ways in which the feminine is figured in Surrealist representation, Suleiman discerns in her work elements of quotation, strategic appropriation, and, perhaps most importantly, the deployment of a sense of humour which destabilises such gendered constructions. See Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Dialogue & Double Allegiance – Some Contemporary Women Artists and the Historical Avant-Garde' in Whitney Chadwick (ed.), *Mirror Images- Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1998).



historical practices which seemed to reveal something about the “puzzles and conundrums inscribed within the medium”.<sup>24</sup>

I want to suggest that Woodman’s practice has elements of such a project of medium-specific criticism, her manipulation of the photograph functioning as an expressive gesture of its reflexivity. However, it is not my intention to pin down the artist’s intention, or to suggest that she was purely motivated by a desire to expose or press her medium’s limits. To do this would be to re-situate her practice within another limiting set of strictures. For although I have tried to interpret Woodman’s manipulation of the medium as evidence of an interest in its own workings and meanings, I also want to suggest that her exploration of the medium through her own image and her own body also disrupts its limits. As if upsetting the language of photography—a masculine language of pseudo-scientific numbers, of technical ‘mastery’ and phallicised ‘point and shoot’—Woodman’s work draws attention to the medium’s status as a craft.

Although Woodman was actively engaged in experimenting in order to push the limits of the medium, her work is also infused with a sense of its own past, with traces and moments of outmoded practice and process, a quality that is exaggerated by her usual production of small-scale format black and white shots. Usually only printing up one or two images from each negative, Woodman’s working method makes clear the way in which she seemed more interested in the photograph’s rare, unique quality, rather than its status as an ephemeral, throw-away and reproducible object. Whilst recalling the unique nature of early photographic prints, Woodman’s work makes further reference to outmoded practices as she draws attention to her hand-crafted method of working. Produced largely whilst a student at RISD, Woodman’s photographs become the evidence of the artist’s learning process, tracing her acquisition of a skillful grasp of the medium as a craft practice. This craft-like quality is further suggested by her use of the album-like structure of the artist’s book format, and also through her recurring iconography of domesticity. Many of Woodman’s photographs were staged within domestic spaces—in her own home, or in abandoned and forsaken spaces in which traces of familial dwelling have all but disappeared—or in studio sites which she made appear domesticated by including carefully chosen props, or by decorating with hand-

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<sup>23</sup> Max Kozloff, ‘Photos within Photographs’, *Artforum*, vol. XIV, no. 6 (February 1976), p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> See the editors’ introduction to *October* 5 (Summer 1978), p. 3. This issue included essays by Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Thierry de Duve, Hollis Frampton and Craig Owens.



drawn imagery of the home. Throughout her work, a number of old quilts and plaid blankets appear, used to form backdrops and floor coverings. Rather than using the blank field of the photographer's roll of backdrop paper as a seamless, decontextualised surface to stage her figures against, Woodman constructed her photographic field as a domesticated space.

By littering her imagery with these references to domesticity, Woodman seems to invest the medium itself with a feminine quality, and in this regard, some of the literature concerning the domestic 'lady' photographers of the nineteenth century has been useful, particularly the work of Carol Armstrong, Lindsay Smith and Carol Mavor.<sup>25</sup> I have made use of their feminist interpretations of the photography of Clementina Hawarden and Julia Margaret Cameron in my consideration of the way in which Woodman's work relates to historical precedents in her own figuration of a domestic theme. I hope to contribute to this body of literature my ideas on how Woodman's re-staging of a similarly enclosed space and her manipulation of the domestic interior as the setting for a self-representational practice, rather than one of portraiture, raises new questions about the relationship of subjectivity to the feminised space of image-making. Rather than offering a sense of the photograph as a product of mechanised and alienated industry, Woodman's work invokes old-fashioned process and a lovingly hand-crafted mode of creation. Bringing to mind themes of feminine labour and domestic creativity, Woodman's process is inscribed with a sense of femininity, a subjectivity which is brought to the fore through her visualisation of her own body and her own image. As the artist is repeatedly and obsessively figured within the photograph's flat, rectilinear field, the limits of that representational space are forever infiltrated by the body, a feminine presence that traces her departed subjectivity.

In her essay 'Problem Sets', Rosalind Krauss notes the way in which Woodman seemed unable to refrain from getting herself in the picture.<sup>26</sup> Krauss discerns in Woodman's practice the remainders of her formalist artistic education, as she reads some of the artist's serially conceived photographs as having been created in response to set

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<sup>25</sup> See Lindsay Smith, *The Politics of Focus, Women, Children and Nineteenth-Century Photography* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1998); Carol Armstrong, 'Cupid's Pencil of Light: Julia Margaret Cameron and the Maternalization of Photography', *October* 76 (Spring 1996), and 'From Clementina to Käsebier: The Photographic Attainment of the "Lady Amateur"', *October* 91 (Winter 2000); and Carol Mavor, *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, 'Problem Sets', in *Bachelors*, pp.161-177.



exercises. As Krauss notes, the 'problem set' was part of Bauhaus education, a way in which young artists learned the formal language of art. Krauss discerns in Woodman's college work evidence of such a formalist photographic training, her serial images answers to problems set in order to explore or learn the rules of the medium. But by involving herself in her photographs, Woodman upsets the formal nature of these exercises. According to Krauss, throughout her education and later as a young photographer, Woodman disrupts the medium's objective language by literally getting in the picture, and her photographs record how she took that language, internalised its problems and puzzling processes, "subjectivized it and rendered it as personal as possible".<sup>27</sup>

Krauss' essay remains the only critical text in which aspects of Woodman's relationship to the photographic medium are foregrounded. That there is a need for a re-evaluation of Woodman's work in relation to the questions of medium has been recognised by George Baker: whilst I hope that by addressing how her photographs reveal something about the nature of the medium I will have filled in some of these perceived blanks in the critical literature on her work, I also want to explore what is at stake for the subjectivity that is implicated as the disruptive principle.<sup>28</sup> As the space of the photograph itself becomes personalised by the act of self-representation, I want to look at how that self is altered through the act of objectification. In examining the relationship of the self to the self-image, the psychoanalytic discourse of subject-formation has been an invaluable tool. As the spaces of Woodman's photographs echo the domestic interiors in which many are staged, the photographic field becomes invested with a home-like quality that brings to mind the spaces—both physical and metaphorical—in which subjectivity is born, forged and developed. I want to consider the way in which the photograph might function as an analogous space in which subjectivity might emerge, or become deformed, or be involved in a constant process of negotiation and inter-subjective exchange.

Whilst Abigail Solomon-Godeau has made use of a Freudian theorisation of fetishism in order to consider the ways in which Woodman's imagery of the female body might destabilise or denaturalise such schemes of desiring looking, I have used psychoanalytic theory as a tool through which issues of selfhood are addressed. In reading Woodman's

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 162.



photographic project as one of self-representation, but one in which attention is constantly drawn to the objectified status of that self, I have made use of a number of psychoanalytic texts from the period in which ideas of dissociation and detachment are addressed. As Woodman becomes both the object of representation, and the artistic agent whose subjectivity is somehow put under duress in the moment of exposure, her photographs conjure an ambiguous and hazy conflation of subject positions. By making an analogy between the self-objectification engendered in the process of self-imaging and the alienation experienced by the subject who feels him- or herself to be somehow dislodged from their own subject position, I suggest that the photograph becomes symbolic of a kind of transition between the two states. I do not wish to suggest that Woodman's photographs are the visual expression of the artist's own psychic state, but that such descriptions of a selfhood captured as if in the moment of self-objectification might reveal something about the way in which subjectivity is always deferred and displaced in acts of photographic self-representation. As I have related this sense of displacement to Luce Irigaray's 1970s project in which psychoanalytic theory is criticised, the photographic position of self-deferral also connects to a theorisation of feminine subjectivity as one that is inherently alienated.<sup>29</sup> Drawing on Irigaray's description of the way in which traditional psychoanalytic theory has constructed the subject as masculine, I have related her descriptions of the isolated, displaced and homeless feminine subjectivity to the displacement—of the material body, of identity, and of a sense of self—upon which photographic image-making depends.

I want to argue that Woodman uses the photograph as the space on which that process of self-displacement is traced, as if making visible the transitional moment in which the self is dislodged from a subject position. A mirror-like surface onto which that sense of a distanced and detached selfhood is produced as an object, the photograph functions like a cast-off skin, a material object whose status is strangely indeterminate. At the same time as it records the impression of the self and the mimesis of a likeness onto

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<sup>28</sup> See Baker, 'Francesca Woodman Reconsidered', pp. 65-67.

<sup>29</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (trans. Catherine Porter) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), (originally published in French as *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977)); *Speculum of the Other Woman* (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), (originally published in French as *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974)); and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill) (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), (originally published in French as *Éthique de la Différence Sexuelle* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1984)).



which identity is intimately pinned, the photograph is also alienated and unfamiliar, an object removed from selfhood.

This paradoxical sense of intimacy and detachment is well-expressed by the use of skin as a metaphor for the photograph's own surface. Throughout Woodman's work, the emphasis on beautifully described found surfaces, body skin and sensuous fabrics becomes a repeated motif. The skin of her body is imaged against scarred walls and decaying architectural surfaces, overlaid with fur, covered with scraps of torn paper or peeling tree bark, producing textural juxtapositions which draw attention to smoothly glossed surface of the photograph, the skin of the image. The way in which Woodman images the skin as a site of breakdown or disruption has been interpreted as evidence of her own psychic malaise. For example, Helaine Posner reads the photographer's diffusion of her own boundary—her own skin—as evocative of her absorption by her surroundings, bringing to mind the dissolution of the psychic structures of a self undergoing an episode of psychotic spatio-temporal disruption.<sup>30</sup> Margaret Sundell has contributed a more theoretically sophisticated reading, as she interprets Woodman's project of self-representation within a Lacanian framework of subject-formation. For Sundell, Woodman's figuration of broken surfaces and hazy, indistinct bodily outlines is evidence of the artist's desire to "surpass the borders between subject and object", as if exploding the "fragile membrane" that protects and shores up identity.<sup>31</sup> Woodman's self-representational photographs are described as a means of ongoing self-creation, each image articulating the "I am, I am, I am" through which identity is maintained, but which draws attention to the fragility of such self-recognition, the ease with which identity becomes lost, as if fractured or dissolved.

Sundell's is the most interesting account of recent years, and her psychoanalytically informed reading of Woodman's imagery is convincing. However, I wish to think about Woodman's figuration or evocation of the theme of 'skin' within a different framework of subject formation. I want to suggest that her photographs offer up an alternative space of subjectivity—not so much a kind of Lacanian mirror in which

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<sup>30</sup> See Helaine Posner's essay 'Negotiating Boundaries in the art of Yayoi Kusama, Ana Mendieta and Francesca Woodman' in Whitney Chadwick (ed.), *Mirror Images- Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 169.

<sup>31</sup> See Margaret Sundell's interesting discussion of Woodman's work in her essay 'Vanishing Points: The Photography of Francesca Woodman', included in M. Catherine De Segher (ed.), *Inside the Visible – An Elliptical Traverse of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art – In, Of, and From the Feminine* (Flanders: The Kanaal Art Foundation & Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 435 & 438.



identity is constantly shored up and broken down, but as a persistent space invested with paradoxical qualities of intimacy and alienation, of proximity and utter detachment, through which an offer of an encounter is held out in invitation. As such, I want to suggest that the photograph might be imagined as a space of inter-subjective encounter, a space in which the subjectivities of artist and spectator might meet.

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes recognises the intimacy forged between spectator and photographic subject in the moment of viewing, and he describes this haunting and ambiguous relationship within a language of the body, a language in which the idea of the skin as a connective but divisive surface is brought to the fore. For him, it is the photograph's reproductive medium which produces the promise of such an encounter: light is imagined as a "carnal medium" configured as a skin-like "umbilical cord" which connects the photographic object to his gaze.<sup>32</sup> A connective tissue which both unites and divides, the photograph's medium of exposure is likened to the skin of the body, and, interestingly, to a lost body, the body of the mother. Barthes' language invokes the originary relationship framed by the maternal dyad, and brings to mind the way in which psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu interprets this relationship as a site of subject-formation dependent upon the skin of the body.<sup>33</sup> Becoming an internalised fantasy of subjective cohesion and psychic envelopment, the skin of the mother is described in Anzieu's notion of the 'Skin Ego' as a surface necessary to the emerging subject's successful individuation.

Whilst I take issue with Anzieu's theory as it depends upon the objectification and suppression of the maternal subject, in a way that is strangely echoed by Barthes' text on photography pinned to the absented image of his own mother, the way in which Anzieu describes the body's skin has interesting connotations in terms of the photograph. As he points out, as the harbourer of the subject's sense of touch, the skin is the surface through which self and other are mediated, the mutuality of touch itself echoed by the skin's structure. It both touches and is touched, and this duality is reflected in the way the skin's surface is exposed to the outside world whilst also protecting and containing the unseen interiority of the body. And unlike the sense of sight or hearing, only the sense of touch can discern space and time at once: as Anzieu

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<sup>32</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> See Didier Anzieu's *The Skin Ego* (trans. Chris Turner) (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1989).

puts it, “[t]he skin can judge time (less well than the ear) and space (less well than the eye), but it alone combines the spatial and temporal dimension”.<sup>34</sup> As a surface of intimacy and detachment, an intermediary space between the subject and the world of objects, and a layer on which space and its temporal reference is traced, the skin’s terms of description recall the photograph itself.

I have taken the theme of the skin to weave together my work: in the first chapter I think about how the photograph exists as a kind of ‘temporal skin’ liable to become stretched or distorted, whilst in the second chapter I look at how the photograph might relate to the role of the maternal skin in subject-formation in the light of Anzieu’s theorisation. In the third chapter, skin becomes the site of symbolic acts of aggression, a surface of suggested pain through which subjectivity is created, as if brought into focus. For the fourth chapter I have explored how Woodman’s images invite a haptic response in the spectator, her use of the artist’s book format becoming the vehicle through which the viewing subject is interpellated in a fantasy of skin-to-skin contact. In the last chapter, I suggest that the self-representational photograph becomes a kind of veil or mask, a displaced surface whose skin-like relationship to the subject is always suspended, and perpetually deferred.

As it frames a space of contact and a fantasy of union with the original subject, I want to suggest that the photograph’s skin-like quality also enables it to be imagined as an inter-subjective space. Rather than interpreting it as a persistent surface through which subjectivity is created, as if the act of objectification renders the idea of the skin as a kind of internalised object that echoes the processes at the heart of Anzieu’s theory, I want to position the photograph within another model of subject-object relations. I have made use of Jessica Benjamin’s utopian vision of identity forged through the reciprocal processes of inter-subjective exchange, a theory which is modelled on a reinterpretation of the maternal dyad as being made up of two subjects, rather than laying emphasis on a subject whose individuation is dependent upon the incorporation of the mother as an object.<sup>35</sup> Benjamin’s theory offers an alternative model of subjectivity which resists traditional psychoanalytic projects which Irigaray describes as founded upon matricide, the suppression of feminine subjectivity.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 14.



In the light of such feminist re-interpretations of the role of maternal subjectivity, Barthes' own story of photography appears haunted by the sign of the mother. Pinned to that absent feminine subject, a subject who is never brought to visual representation, Barthes' text provides a model of the photographic medium seemingly underpinned by traditional psychoanalytic discourses in which femininity is always displaced from representation. As Irigaray points out, in such theorisations—of which Anzieu's is an example—the feminine subject is always cast from her subject position, homeless and self-displaced.<sup>36</sup> By relating the photograph's own invocation of subjectivity to a feminist project through which traditional psychoanalytic positions are re-framed, I hope to suggest that it might offer a space in which that displacement is exposed. Rather than remaining the obscured subject underpinning representation—echoing Phelan's feminisation of the photograph's unfulfilled negative image as the print's own haunting 'unconscious'—I want to suggest that by using her own body and her own image, Woodman brings that moment of displacement into the frame of representation.<sup>37</sup>

It is not my intention to suggest that by thinking of the photograph as a field of inter-subjective exchange Woodman's act of self-representation might offer some kind of reparation or reunion with the artist herself. Such an encounter could only ever be missed, as the process through which the photograph is created depends on that subject's absence. Produced by the absence of light, the shadow cast by her body on the negative's sensate surface, the photographic image is created from absence, from an inherent loss which brings to mind the way in which Benjamin models her theory of subject-formation within similar terms of description. For her, the space of inter-subjective exchange is well expressed by the metaphor of the shadow falling upon the ego, an intermediary shadow that remains intimately linked, but utterly removed from its referent.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1995) and *Shadow of the Other – Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York & London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> See Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 126.

<sup>37</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 70. By invoking Luce Irigaray's exposition of woman's multiplicity as profoundly destabilising to a traditional psychoanalytic construction of the 'one' (the always masculine subject) through the suppression of the other, the maternal subject, Phelan maps both the photographic print and femininity onto the 'ontology of the copy,' as they both fill in, or develop the 'other/wise'.

<sup>38</sup> See Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, p. xii. Benjamin develops Freud's description of the melancholic position in which libido is withdrawn from a lost love object and into the self, establishing a



Rather, I want to suggest that by re-enacting or re-staging this moment of loss, a loss which becomes in Benjamin's terms the space of possible interaction, Woodman's imaging of a self undergoing the disappearance endemic in the act of objectification frames a moment in which subjectivity might emerge. It is not the 'essence' of Woodman herself that appears, but instead the subjectivity of the viewer, as the spectator is interpellated in the act of looking. Woodman's work makes the spectator aware of his or her own self, becoming drawn into the act of viewing through the artist's manipulation of the small scale which demands close viewing or the promise of haptic communion seemingly offered by the pages of one of her books. It is in that moment of viewing that subjectivity is both activated and evacuated, as the interaction of the viewer sets in motion the process of the artist's own disappearance. Animating Woodman's performance of photography, her performance of self-representation, and her performance of photographic objectification, the involvement of the viewing subject instigates the transitional moment in which the artist's subjectivity is lost.

Bringing to life the temporality of the photograph in the instant of viewing, the act of viewing is one in which Woodman's transition becomes suspended, captured in the hazy confusion between subjecthood and objecthood. A kind of veiled encounter, in which subjectivities are activated and lost, emerging and disappearing, Woodman's project of photography is one of othered self-representation. Not portraying any sense of her own self, but instead drawing attention to the subjectivity of the viewer, Woodman's act of apparent self-portraiture is always projected outside of her own subject position. Capturing a self in that subtle moment of transition, a self undergoing the process through which she becomes objectified, Woodman's fleeting imagery of self becomes testimony to a fugitive subject, a presence fleeing the conditions of photography itself.

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process through which the ego becomes identified with that lost object. As Freud describes it, the abandoned lost object leaves the trace of its absence, in the moment in which "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego". See Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, p. 249. I have explored this notion at length in the final chapter of this thesis.

## 1

**Photography's Haunted Spaces: The 'House' Series**

In response to a now forgotten brief set as part of an art college project, Francesca Woodman produced a series of photographs shot within the derelict confines of an old building which she found in the residential streets surrounding the school in Providence, Rhode Island. Slipping into this abandoned house, Woodman fixed her camera on a tripod and set the timer, got herself into position, and during the relatively long exposure times necessary to register her impression in the gloomy daylight filtering through the windows, performed for her camera. The resulting prints form a loosely linked body of photographs that, since the artist's death in 1981, have been grouped together under the collective title of the 'House' series. In each of the photographs in this set, Woodman photographed her own body in states of increasingly blurred motion, as if tracing a corporeal dissolution. Probably discovered by accident, the blurred effect was perhaps the surprise but not unwelcome outcome of an attempt to photograph her stilled body within this unlit space, an interior whose dim natural light demanded exposure times of perhaps one second or more.

One untitled photograph taken between 1975 and 1976, (fig. 1.1), shows Woodman in one of the interior rooms of the house, fully clothed in her trademark girlish costume of floral dress, petticoat and black slippers. A slight swish of her skirts has been captured on the film as a soft blur, suggestive of a motion which is echoed by the door in the background that appears to be opening as Woodman draws it toward her with her just-moving hand gestures. The blurred effect is more pronounced in another photograph, which has been given the title of *House #3* (fig. 1.2): here, Woodman crouches under a bright, over-exposed window, her form vague and shifting but her gaze still apparent.<sup>1</sup> In *House #4* (fig. 1.3), having upended the mantel of the fireplace and tilted it against the chimney breast, Woodman created a space into which she crawled, resting herself with one leg either side of the upright columns. Capturing herself as she ducked under

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<sup>1</sup> Francesca Woodman rarely gave her photographs titles, although she occasionally wrote snippets of text on the prints, some of which have subsequently been used as titles since the artist's death. George Woodman pointed out that the photographs under discussion in this chapter were assigned these titles during the process of archiving Woodman's work, in order to give some sense of chronology and sequence to the nearly six hundred photographs she produced (in conversation with the author, New York, March 2001 and April 2002).



the frame, Woodman's face is obscured, her body caught in the act of disappearing into the architecture of the hearth.

Woodman's acts of blurred self-depiction in the abandoned spaces of this house have been the focus of much of the critical writing her work has received in the seventeen years since her oeuvre was released for public viewing by her estate in 1986.<sup>2</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau reads a slightly macabre, gothic aspect into this series.<sup>3</sup> Relating Woodman's staging of her own form blurring into the surrounding space of the old, decaying house to the theme of feminine engulfment at the heart of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a story published in 1892, Solomon-Godeau makes a link between Woodman's photographs and a tale of late Victorian American domesticity.<sup>4</sup> In Gilman's text, which narrates the nameless central female character's descent into madness during a period of post-natal confinement, the home itself becomes a metaphor for the discomfort and suffocating entrapment the woman feels in her domestic role. As Solomon-Godeau notes, the seclusion of this fictional space is not only imprisoning, but actively consuming, violent and effacing. Discerning a similar sense of simultaneous claustrophobia and aggressivity in Woodman's imaged domestic interior, Solomon-Godeau describes the way in which the fireplace in *House #4* appears to swallow Woodman's body, as the artist surrenders herself as a "living sacrifice to the domus".<sup>5</sup>

But in other critical writing since the publication of Solomon-Godeau's own influential text, the blurred effect that Woodman has achieved throughout this series of photographs has been used as the visual evidence to justify increasingly psycho-biographical readings of the photographer's work. Woodman's highly staged illusory

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<sup>2</sup> The first major solo exhibition of Woodman's photographs took place at the Wellesley College Museum in 1986, although her work had been included in a few group exhibitions during her life; see the introduction to this thesis for details of this exhibition, and its accompanying catalogue.

<sup>3</sup> See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Just Like a Woman' (1986), reprinted in *Photography at the Dock, Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 252.

<sup>4</sup> See Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (originally published 1892), reprinted in Anne J. Lane (ed.), *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader: The Yellow Wallpaper & Other Fiction* (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1980). Lane's editorial introduction has been useful for biographical information. For a discussion of Gilman's text in relation to the theme of American domesticity, see Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (Berkeley, CA & Oxford: University of California Press, 1991). Also, Elaine R. Hedges' afterword included in the 1973 edition of the story (New York: The Feminist Press); and Julie Bates Dock (ed.), *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the History of its Publication and Reception* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> See Solomon-Godeau, 'Just Like a Woman', p. 252.



dissolution into the architectural support of this building has been read as symptomatic or expressive of her own state of mental health, her photographs as a diaristic and highly personal narrative of psychic breakdown.<sup>6</sup> Helaine Posner, for example, whilst interpreting Woodman's technical exploration of the possibilities of blurring as indicative of the young artist's interest in the legacy of Surrealist imagery and subsequent engagement in the strategic destabilisation of the female body and image, goes on to collapse the critical distance such a project suggests. Like Solomon-Godeau, Posner relates the *House* series to Gilman's text, but in ways that insist on the personal nature of its content, indicative of a deeply troubled subjectivity. As she puts it, as if the artist were a direct descendent of the fictional female character central to *The Yellow Wallpaper*, "one hundred years later Woodman also appears to be at risk of disappearing into the supposed sanctuary of the home, her fragile identity finally engulfed by a threatening world".<sup>7</sup> Echoing Woodman's own visual dissolution, Posner's interpretation merges the artist's identity and mental state with her technical manipulations of the photographic medium.

A more recent critical essay by Margaret Sundell from 1996 returns once again to this literary source, stating that like Gilman's narrative, Woodman's photographic series could be read as a similarly claustrophobia-inducing "nightmare of femininity", one which describes the "literal engulfing of a woman by her domestic role".<sup>8</sup> But to attribute such a motivation or experience to Woodman is a little unrealistic, as she was certainly not a subject limited or engulfed by a maternal or domestic role, and her physical appearance in this series, with loosened free-flowing hair and girlish costume upsets such an interpretation. As Sundell suggests, Woodman's imagery here portrays a

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<sup>6</sup> Woodman committed suicide on 19 January 1981 at the age of 22.

<sup>7</sup> Helaine Posner, 'Negotiating Boundaries in the art of Yayoi Kusama, Ana Mendieta and Francesca Woodman' in Whitney Chadwick (ed.), *Mirror Images – Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998). Whilst Kathryn Hixson, writing in 1992, reclaimed the performative aspect of Woodman's photographs, and rightly pointed out the way in which this series produces the effect of her "metaphorically merging the body and place", a subsequent text by Jen Budney from 1996 regresses back into a simplistic collapsing of the artist and her work. See Kathryn Hixson's essay, 'Essential Magic: the Photographs of Francesca Woodman' in *Francesca Woodman, Photographische Arbeiten/Photographic Works* (Zurich: Shedhalle & Münster: Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1992); and Jen Budney's essay in *Francesca Woodman* (Modena: Galleria Civica, 1996). Making a link between Woodman and Sylvia Plath, a link which the writer herself points out is perhaps too easy, and of course rooted in each artist's tragic suicide, Budney states that both women "immersed themselves, we might even say overwhelmed themselves, in their environments" (p. 13). Considered in relation to photographs in which the effect of merging is achieved through the technical manipulation of the medium, this reading can only strengthen the limiting strictures of psycho-biographical interpretation.

more child-like subjectivity, recalling instead the figure of *Alice in Wonderland*. In this way, Sundell relates Woodman's narrative of domesticity to the experience of adolescence, the precarious borderlines experienced by a subject on the hazy limits of childhood, teetering on the brink of womanhood.

It is likely that Woodman herself had read Gilman's tale, as she was an avid reader of women's literature and classic fiction of that period, and an artist who found much of her inspiration in literary sources.<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself lived in Providence and studied art for a time at RISD, and was therefore an alumnus of Woodman's own art school.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps aware of this local and historical connection, Woodman may have tried to act out this domestic drama in a local Providence house. The blowsy floral wallpaper which she chose to include drooping away from the walls in fig. 1.3 and littering the floor of fig. 1.2 recalls the exaggerated pattern of the tale, with its suffocating "torturing" lines, the "florid arabesque" of its pattern.<sup>11</sup> Whether this old paper was found hanging picturesquely from the walls, or whether Woodman herself carefully pulled it away from the plaster, or even pasted found scraps up herself is not known: perhaps it was artfully contrived to resonate with the papery limits animated in Gilman's domestic melodrama. As if re-staging the story, by diving under the hearth and window, crawling around the walled limits of the space in a blur of slow motion, Woodman seems to re-enact the creeping motion of the woman in the text.<sup>12</sup> By dissolving her own image, Woodman's body takes the place of the "funny mark" the heroine notices traversing the walls of her confining chamber.<sup>13</sup> A "streak that runs round the room", the strange marking on the wall appears as a "long, straight, even *smooch*, as if it had been rubbed over and over", a trace left by the woman as she pressed her body against the paper of the walls.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever her motivation for this series, it is undoubtedly true that Woodman had an ongoing fascination for the imagery of the Victorian era, which seems to be articulated

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<sup>8</sup> Margaret Sundell, 'Vanishing Points: The Photography of Francesca Woodman', in M. Catherine De Segher (ed.), *Inside the Visible- An Elliptical Traverse of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art – In, Of, and From the Feminine* (Flanders: The Kanaal Art Foundation & Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 435.

<sup>9</sup> Information supplied by George Woodman (in conversation with the author, New York, April 2002).

<sup>10</sup> See Ann J. Lane, *The Yellow Wallpaper Reader*, p. x.

<sup>11</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> See Hedges' discussion of the trope of the creeping woman in her afterword to the 1973 edition of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29 & 35.



most effectively by the set of photographs under discussion here. Whilst it is certainly not my intention to reconfirm those readings in which Woodman's 1970s artistic subjectivity is collapsed with that of an autobiographical but fictional character created out of a writer's personal experience of suffocating domesticity at the end of the nineteenth-century, there is something in these photographs which brings to mind a Victorian aesthetic, a kind of nostalgic remembrance of a bygone era. According to Ann Gabhart, Woodman felt herself to be strangely out of place and time in the 1970s, proclaiming instead that she would have been far more suited to life as a Victorian woman. Apparently, she "often said she had been born in the wrong era, claiming she was much better suited to the aestheticized formality of the Victorian age".<sup>15</sup>

Throughout her career as a young student, and as a newly-graduated artist trying to establish herself as a professional photographer in New York, Woodman developed her own anachronistic personal style. As a teenager exploring London in the 1960s, and as a young woman living in New York and Rome in the 1970s, Woodman began obsessively to collect old clothing. From hand-me-downs and precious gifts donated by her grandmother, and from the two-dollar bags of used clothing she bought from thrift stores on the Lower East Side, Woodman hoarded found items and accessories to form a stylised art-school wardrobe seemingly at odds with the contemporary fashions of the period.<sup>16</sup> Woodman appropriated this artfully crafted persona as the subject of her photography, using her anachronistic identity as a pictorial construction which recurs throughout her work. Becoming part of the work, Woodman's wardrobe of old-fashioned dresses, of floral pinafores and rustling petticoats, formal white gloves and veiled hats, seems contrived to offer the fleeting glimpse of a faded historical moment.

In her recent account of Victorian photography, Carol Mavor connects Woodman's use of costume and dress to a history of women's photographic practice. Looking at the artist's floral frocks and starched petticoats, and her recurrent use of a particular polka-dot printed dress, Mavor notes the way Woodman is most often "adorned in a dress

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<sup>15</sup> Ann Gabhart, in her biographical notes included in *Francesca Woodman, Photographic Work* (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Museum & New York: Hunter College Art Gallery, 1986), p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> George Woodman remembered how Francesca had collected clothing during trips abroad during her adolescence, and how as a young artist in New York she scoured thrift stores, buying up bags of used and vintage clothing. He also noted how disdainful Francesca was of contemporary fashions of the period, and how she refused to wear the sportswear and casual clothing popular at that time (in conversation with the author, New York, April 2002).

from the past”.<sup>17</sup> Betty Woodman, the artist’s mother, confirmed this observation, remembering how Francesca “had a lot of old clothes”, second-hand apparel and hand-me-downs through which the artist created this style.<sup>18</sup> Whether vintage items, or contemporary clothing worn in such a way to give an aged impression, Woodman’s costumes (like so many of her props) are fundamental to the staging of her works. In the ‘House’ series, the Liberty-print floral dress Woodman wears was made for her in Italy as a young girl, one of a number of dresses which, for Mavor, “feel like history”.<sup>19</sup> Discussing one of the photographs Woodman included in the pages of her published artist’s book *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, Mavor draws attention to Woodman’s own words scrawled under a pair of images (fig. 1.4). Having pictured herself standing on a mirror in her studio, surrounded by old clothes, a cat, some modern-day Halloween paraphernalia, and scraps of a fur stole, Woodman wrote on the print that “these things arrived from my grandmother”.<sup>20</sup> For Mavor, Woodman’s use of her found objects and treasured gifts worked to unhinge the specificity of the photograph’s temporality, as time itself becomes anachronistic, and “Woodman her grandmother”. Invoking the past, Woodman’s photographs seem to re-awaken moments lost in time, tracing a history of matrilineal lineage through a feminine obsession with dress.

The evocation of a Victorian formality which Woodman created by carefully selecting items from her personal wardrobe to use as props for her photographs invests her prints with an archaic quality, one which in some examples seems to become the subject of the image. Her small black and white shots have the look of early photographs, and this aged quality becomes central to the image, as if the artist was attempting to capture a kind of anachronistic historicity through making reference to the outmoded practices of the medium. Woodman would have undoubtedly been familiar with many examples of nineteenth century photographic practices, and extensive bodies of work by Victorian photographers were exhibited in New York galleries during the 1970s. Catalogues of these works were easy for her to find in the library at RISD, and these photographic

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<sup>17</sup> Carol Mavor, *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 164. Mavor also makes reference to Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* in relation to Hawarden’s photographs.

<sup>18</sup> Betty Woodman (Francesca’s mother), in conversation with Carol Mavor, *Becoming*, p. 168.

<sup>19</sup> Mavor, *Becoming*, p. 169.

<sup>20</sup> See *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, one of the several artist’s books Woodman produced during her career. This book was published by Synapse Press, Philadelphia (edited by Daniel Tucker) in 1981, shortly before the artist’s death. To this date, the other books Woodman made remain unpublished.



precedents were at the time celebrated as the early ‘masters’ (and mistresses) of the medium as a fine art.<sup>21</sup>

Visual resonances are clear, as many of Woodman’s photographs have an archaic, faded quality, as if they were long-forgotten family treasures unearthed in an attic and brought to light. Although standard photographic practice for students at the time, Woodman’s exclusive use of the black and white format, in conjunction with the diminutive size and scale of her finished prints, further heightens the anachronistic quality of her work. Rarely enlarging her negatives to a final print size of much more than six inches square, many of Woodman’s prints are smaller still, giving the work a rarified and unique quality, a quality which Solomon-Godeau describes as a precious and jewel-like “lapidary” beauty.<sup>22</sup> Toward the end of her life Woodman explored the potential offered by the intimate action of the contact printing process. Both of the cameras used regularly by the photographer over her career held relatively large negatives: the Yashica Mat that was used to take the photographs under discussion here took square format negatives of two and a quarter inches squared, and were enlarged to a finished print size of roughly six inches square. Later on, after graduation from RISD in 1978, Woodman began to use an old, larger-format press camera, whose four by five inch negatives were suitable for the production of a number of contact prints, whose crisp precision and exquisite detail are apparent in the resultant same-size prints.<sup>23</sup> Evocative of the precious, unique prints of early photography, Woodman’s photographs are infused with a sense of historicity, which is itself exaggerated by her imagery, enhanced by her choice of settings and props, and by the technical decisions she made.

This anachronistic quality seems to have been recognised during Woodman’s lifetime, as some of her photographs were included in a group show at the Daniel Wolf, Inc. Gallery in New York in April of 1980, which was given the title ‘Pictorialism’. In this

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<sup>21</sup> Whilst George Woodman could not remember his daughter having made any explicit connections or references to Victorian photography, the work of ‘domestic’ photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron, Lewis Carroll and Clementina Hawarden was undoubtedly a point of reference for the young artist. He agreed that Woodman would have been aware of such practices, as they were well known as fine art photography at the time (in conversation with the author, New York, April 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Solomon-Godeau, ‘Just like a Woman’, p. 252.

<sup>23</sup> The contact printing process that Woodman used more often later in her career is discussed in relation to work made in New York in the late 1970s and very early 1980s in the final chapter of this thesis. Many thanks to George Woodman for giving me the details of the various cameras Woodman used in her career (in conversation with the author, New York, April 2002). The detailed technical specifications of the Yashica Mat used to take the photographs under discussion here can be found in the apparatus’

show, photographs by other contemporary artists such as Sheila Metzner and Sally Mann were exhibited alongside examples of pictorialist photography from the late nineteenth century. Pointing out how the term had come to represent a kind of sentimentalised and overly imitative genre of soft-focus photography at odds with the reigning influence of a modernist straight-style practice, reviewer Gene Thornton noted how 'pictorialism' had become a "dirty word" within the language of the fine art photography of the time.<sup>24</sup> According to Thornton, the premise of the show seemed to be one of both rehabilitation, as it attempted to reclaim the reputation of earlier pictorialist photographers, and to make clear a line of descent to a new generation of contemporary artists working within a similar style. As a "recurrent impulse" in photographic practice, pictorialist tendencies are described by Thornton as indicative of the valuation of personal expression over subject matter or a consideration of correct technique. The stylistic manipulation of soft-focus blurs and painterly effects exemplified in pictorialist portrait photography deviates from a project of medium-specific criticism or expression, and so seems to be a kind of anachronistic throw-back to a pre-modernist practice in which the mechanical and chemical processes of photographic production were veiled beneath the print's artful surface.

The blurred effects Woodman created in the three photographs taken in the old house bring to mind some of the artfully worked painterly effects of a pictorialist style. But I do not want to suggest that Woodman's work fits neatly within this genre of photography, for that could only invest her project with a conservative or even retrogressive intention. Instead, I want to argue that Woodman's contrived evocation of such examples of outmoded photographic practice actually positions the artist's project within a contemporaneous interest in the medium itself. By restaging such 'pictorialist' effects, Woodman's imagery makes clear the way in which the photographic image is always unavoidably conditioned by its own limits. By making such outmoded effects the subject of her work, Woodman exposes their explicitly photographic construction, as if to make clear the way in which any attempts to conceal the medium are doomed to fail. As if visually echoing the words of contemporary reviewer Carter Ratcliff, who noted that the "nonsensical" intention of attempting to create a painterly aesthetic

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manual, *Yashica Twin Lens Reflex Guide*, by W. D. Emanuel (London & New York: The Focal Press, 1966).

<sup>24</sup> Gene Thornton, 'Beyond Pictorialism', review of 'Pictorialism' at the Daniel Wolf Inc., 30 W57th St, April-May 1980, in *New York Times*, April 13 II (1980), p. 48.



through the photographic medium, Woodman uses her medium to expose the mechanics of its own workings.<sup>25</sup>

That Woodman seems to have been attempting to bring the photographic medium into its own field of representation is evidenced by the fact that her work was included in another group show which took place during the same months of 1980 as the 'Pictorialism' show, but which was staged across town at The Alternative Museum. Given the more progressive title of 'Beyond Photography 80', this show's emphasis was on experimental uses of the medium. Unlike the apparently conservative interpretative framework of the pictorialist genre, this show concentrated on the ways in which the limits of the medium were being explored and probed during the period. In this alternative space, Woodman exhibited some of the large-scale blueprints she had begun to produce at the end of the 1970s as she experimented with the diazotype process. These enormous prints, some of which measured over three square metres, were shown alongside examples of photography that attempted to transgress or extend the boundaries of the medium, including images in which carbon dust was sprinkled on photo-sensitive, clay-coated paper, photo-collages, xerox-copies, and manipulated polaroid shots.

Although the show's title—'Beyond Photography 80'—invokes the future of the medium, and as reviewer Guy Trebay pointed out, also refers to a photographic practiced extended and defined through experimental diversity, a photography which is "beyond the normal interpretation of the word", Woodman's experimental pieces also show the artist's interest in archaic techniques.<sup>26</sup> The blueprint technique she used, although innovative and original within the context of fine art photography, also seems to refer to moments in photographic history. As if produced out of a kind of reference to outmoded photographic processes, Woodman's monumental blueprints were created by projecting positive slides onto the huge sheets of fragile light-sensitive paper for as long as six or seven hours. This strung-out period of light-registration both recalls and exaggerates the attenuated moment of exposure necessary in the production of early photographs, in which the subject undergoing representation was forced to stand still for lengthy and arduous periods of time. Woodman's almost nostalgic re-staging of a long-

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<sup>25</sup> Carter Ratcliff, 'Photography: The Persistence of Pictorialism', *Art in America*, vol. 68, no. 7 (September 1980).



gone anachronism produces a combative clash of temporal references, and the interweaving of the personal vision intrinsic to the pictorialist aesthetic, and the avant-garde impulse of experimental technique frame the tension found throughout Woodman's manipulation of the photographic medium. For just as her development of the blueprint technique seems evidence of the artist's desire to push the limits of what the photographic process was capable of achieving at that point in time, so it is also haunted by the ghostly memories of outmoded procedures.

This haunting memory of some of the medium's moments seems to be re-staged in the photographs taken in the decaying spaces of the old house in Providence. It is not only Woodman's choice of costume that provokes a memory of nineteenth century imagery, but also the way in which she manipulated light to construct and frame her photographic setting. With its emphasis on corners and limits, bleached out windows and confining walls, the architectural space that Woodman pictures here brings to mind the imagery of Clementina Hawarden, a photographer whose own body of work is similarly concentrated upon the repeated depiction of young female subjects staged within the confined spaces of domestic life. Whilst of course Hawarden was limited to such spaces within the structure of social life of the period, her recurring use of a similar set of domestic settings resonates with Woodman's own work. Both photographers' imagery centres on the portrayal of interior space in which the borders and limits of that space are constantly affirmed and re-iterated. Staging their female models against walls, leaning against fireplaces, positioned adjacent to thresholds and doors, or gazing wistfully through the glazed panes of windows, the interiority suggested in each woman's imagery is always held in tension with what lies beyond, emphasising the boundaries of public and private space.

But it is in their shared manipulation of light to exaggerate a sense of physical containment that my interest here lies. In both women's work, light is not only that medium of clarification and development necessary to the photograph itself, but conversely also becomes the means through which a subject is obscured, contained or constricted. One photographic study by Hawarden (fig. 1.5) shows a young female model, apparently dressed in outdoor clothes, situated inside and seated at a writing desk. The interiority of the setting seems exaggerated by the highly decorative

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<sup>26</sup> Guy Trebay, 'Beyond Photography', review of *Beyond Photography 80* exhibition at The Alternative



patterning of the starred wallpaper, a pattern which makes the imaged space seem shallow. Conjuring the effect of containment, this sense of enclosed space is further heightened by the bright light falling from a window on the left hand side of the frame. The sunlight casts the shadow of the bars of the window onto the female figure, her body becoming ensnared between two diagonally slanting bands of shadow which frame and contain her form.

In a similar way, throughout her practice Woodman investigated the potential of light as a tool through which she could manipulate and enhance her fundamentally straight photographs, as she used it in conjunction with her own body to re-stage the processes specific to the medium through which the subject is produced as a photographic object. By using natural bright light as a means of hiding and concealing the object it promises to reveal, Woodman manipulated her light sources in order to obscure, deflect and restrict access to the body exposed under the camera's open-shuttered gaze. Another photograph, an image which is related to the series set in the old house, shows Woodman seated against the backdrop of the pitted wall. A shaft of light falls from the left of the frame, overlaying her body with a number of bright stripes which intersect to form a grid of bars that appear to constrict her form.<sup>27</sup> The emphasis on this falling light introduces the outside world into the image, recalling the way Hawarden captured the shadowy lines cast by the bars of the window frames to heighten the sense of an enclosing domestic space. In another example, the light falling onto her body produces the patterned effect of alternate bright white and deepest black, striping her own form in a way that is reminiscent of Man Ray's Surrealist photographs of Lee Miller from the 1930s, a series of images with which the young artist was undoubtedly familiar (fig. 1.6). In this example, light lends Miller's body a sculptural, massive materiality, and the shadowy recession of her right arm makes it appear dismembered. The reverberating pattern of the bands of cast light and shadow also constrict her form, producing the effect of a caged body, a subject contained by the very conditions of light on which the reproduction of the photographic image depends.

It is interesting that both Woodman and Hawarden frequently rehearsed the trope of the woman at the mirror in order to examine the reflexive interplay of light and self-

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Museum, New York, 19 April-17 May 1980, in the *Village Voice*, May 12 (1980), p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately as these are unpublished photographs, it has not been possible to obtain reproductions of these prints from Woodman's archive at this point in time



representation. A symbol of feminine narcissism, in these images the mirror becomes a paradoxical space of obfuscation and denial as both photographers manipulated available light, flooding the mirror's silvered surface with an over-exposed, bleaching brightness which destroys its reflective function. Becoming a space of ambiguous representation in which its purpose of self-reflection is denied, the mirror appears in a number of Hawarden's studies in conjunction with her female subjects. In one example from 1861-1862, given the title *Photographic Study (Clementina Maude)*, a young woman is depicted in a moment of self-study, peering into a mirror as her dress slips from one shoulder (fig. 1.7). Her face is turned away from the camera, but the mirror into which she gazes fails to reflect her image back to us. Thrown into deep shadow by the brightly-lit space of the window also captured in the mirror's reflection, her own returned look is lost. Light streaming through the window from the world outside has become the means through which the imaged reflection is denied, shadowed in hazy obscurity. Another example, (fig. 1.8), shows a young woman seated looking into a hand mirror, a surface which is again non-reflective, revealing only a band of bright white. Woodman herself made a number of images using a similarly shaped mirror, which in one example (fig. 1.9) refuses to throw back a reflection, becoming a pool of obscured and hazy light.

Both a tool through which photographic space is disordered, and a space of false self-representation, the mirror in Woodman's photographs was also utilised as a surface of denial and deception, as she manipulated the light reflected from its surface to function as a paradoxical medium of obscurity. The strategic obfuscation of the reflective space of the mirror, itself a framed space of self-representation which, like the photographic image, is dependent on the availability of light, is a theme explored by Woodman in a set of works which come under the collective title of the *Self-Deceit* series. Made in Rome in 1978, this set of around nine photographs shows Woodman manipulating an old, unframed mirror in conjunction with her body. But rather than mirroring or doubling her image, its worn surface is manipulated to deflect or obscure her reflection.

In one shot from the series, (fig. 1.10), Woodman holds the mirror up to cover her face, its bleached out surface probing the top framing edge of the print, the light with which it is filled appearing to leach out into the space off-frame. Destroying the mirror's framed and contained space of self-representation, the white light also ruptures the



photograph's own reflexive limits. Another shot shows Woodman crawling between the wall and the mirror, concealing her face with the mirror's material surface as she takes up her position behind, as if searching for the uninhabitable world through the looking glass itself. In a third example (fig. 1.11), the mirror has been placed on the floor, propped up against another old, scarred wall. A glimpse of the photographer's clothed legs and the feet of a tripod are captured in the mirror's reflection, introducing the notion and material body of the photographer into the image. Although unclear, Woodman herself appears to be included as the female figure standing next to the mirror, her image blurred into almost total indistinction. Figuring herself as an amorphous and naked form displaced from the mirrored plane of self-reflection, Woodman represents a divided and self-displaced subjectivity that complicates the notion of the self-portrait itself.

Woodman's ghostly tracing of the faceless photographer's body here recalls another of Hawarden's studies of her daughter Clementina Maude, taken between 1862 and 1863 (fig. 1.12). Hawarden's photograph shows the young woman carefully posed next to a large cheval glass, with her hand held to her head. No trace of the girl is captured in the mirror, for it only reflects the brightly exposed window in the unseen background behind her mother's camera, the image of which is included on its tripod. But Hawarden herself is absent, except for the "faint suggestion of a disembodied hand" captured as a whisper of movement as she removed and replaced the lens cap.<sup>28</sup> The photographer is just-traced as an imaginary and, according to Mavor's interpretation, much-desired subjectivity who remains "just missed", a body lost to the camera.<sup>29</sup> The extended moment of exposure has caught a trace of Hawarden's photographic action, the moment in which she hid herself from her camera's own gaze, absenting herself from the action. Recorded as a trace of light, an almost invisible blur, Hawarden's presence is betrayed by photography's own medium of representation, the combination of bodily motion in light capturing her presence as an indicator of absence. Woodman's image dislocates the structure of subjectivities Hawarden's photograph suggests, as it is her own presence as both photographer and subject of the image which becomes confused. Her authorial position is not only absented, but replaced with another, a collaborator who takes her place. As if captured in the moment of evacuating her

<sup>28</sup> Virginia Dodier, catalogue raisonné, Victoria and Albert Museum, photo: D559, 1988, quoted by Mavor, *Becoming*, p. xix.

<sup>29</sup> Mavor, *Becoming*, p. xix.

subject-position as photographer, creator of the image itself, Woodman uses light as the means through which these positions are destabilised, made questionable as identity is paradoxically obscured.

In the 'House' series, the light streaming through the windows from the world outside has been manipulated, albeit perhaps accidentally at first, to bleach out the detail of the windows. The long exposure times necessary in the house's unlit interior rooms have resulted in the windows becoming over-exposed, throwing the remaining detail of the branches of the tree in *House #3* and the neighbouring building in *House #4* into deep contrast, producing the strangely inverted effect of a negative recording. The confusing play of light and dark exaggerates a sense of containment, as the windows become blank spaces of searing light, blocking access to the world outside, sealing up the interior to produce a sense of suffocating containment. This is exaggerated by the fireplace just-glimpsed in *House #3* and brought centre-stage in *House #4*, which had by happy accident been bricked-up, becoming a blocked orifice in the house's walls, and also by the way in which the walls are marked with strange shapes of light and dark. Details on the walls' pitted surfaces in *House #3* are recorded as ink-deep absences: toward the top left of the image, a black shape seems to cut across the corner, a floating form which seems to suggest a literally absent section in the print's surface, an effect echoed by another squarish form beneath it, and a circular shape to the right of the frame. Drawing attention to both the corners of the interior space, and to the containing limits of the photographic frame itself, Woodman's manipulation of the varying degrees of tone and shadow seem to delineate the edges of the interior, through the configuration of an enclosed, suffocating represented space.

So whilst carefully preparing the scene of disordered domesticity by upending fireplaces, scattering the floors with rubbish, opening and closing doors, and tilting them on their hinges, Woodman also uses the photographic medium itself to heighten the discomfiting and all-encompassing quality of claustrophobic containment. At once invoking the domestic imagery of Hawarden's nineteenth century photography, Woodman's own exploration and manipulation of domestic confinement also makes use of a similar set of motifs and concerns common to women artists who were working in the context of 1970s American art practice. Reawakened by the feminist movement, the





theme of domesticity came to dominate artistic production by politically engaged female artists at the time.

It is not my intention to suggest that Woodman's practice can easily be inserted within the history of such politically-engaged acts, but rather to examine the ways in which the body of the six hundred or so photographs she took during this period in the 1970s is haunted by a set of themes and motifs with which feminist artists were also working. 'Domesticity'—as a geographical, architectural, and social space, a set of roles, and the physical and imaginary site of psychic development—was at the time being reclaimed as a site of artistic performance, a rich source of imagery, and a politically-contested arena of subjectivity in which women's experience was being brought to light. Interestingly, some of the recurring themes resonate with the glimpses of Victorian domestic life we are offered in Hawarden's photography, themes which Woodman's photography seems to re-stage.

Describing some of the themes being explored in contemporary women's practice in 1976, the language Lucy Lippard used itself seems to re-invoke the suffocating sense of containment described in Hawarden's work. Noting the common tendency of women artists working during this period in the 1970s to represent personal experience through a shared vocabulary of recurring motifs, Lippard described how the iconographies of "veiling, confinement, enclosure, pressures, barriers, [and] constrictions" employed by these artists suggest both the physical and psychical states provoked by the restrictive role of domestic life.<sup>30</sup> As real homes became sites of intervention, performative acts were themselves taken out of the semi-public space and masculine-dominated economy of the art gallery and transposed within the physically enclosing limits of the domestic house. Exemplified by a project such as *Womanhouse*, created under the supervision of Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro in 1972, domestic space was probed, exposed and reclaimed by women artists who variously explored themes of self-creation, of feminine identity, and the boredom and banality of debased and feminised domestic labour.

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<sup>30</sup> Lucy Lippard, in the introduction to *From the Center, Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), p. 7. See also Lippard's 'Household Images in Art,' *Ms.*, 1, no.9, March 1973, reprinted in *From the Center*; and Helen Molesworth's recent re-examination of 1970s feminist practice in relation to issues of feminine labour and the body in 'House Work and Art Work,' *October* 92 (Spring 2000).

As Arlene Raven has stated, for these politically activated artists, the domestic space of the home was the arena in which their own subjectivities were formed and de-formed, as they grew up in the exaggerated domesticity of America in the post-war period.<sup>31</sup> As girls in the 1950s, it was within what Lois Banner terms the “Neo-Victorianism” of the period, with its attendant resurrection of archaic ideals of ‘separate spheres’, that this generation of feminist artists found their well of experience.<sup>32</sup>

Martha Rosler used the domestic confines of the kitchen as both the physical space and social framework for her 1973-74 video performance entitled *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (fig. 1.13).<sup>33</sup> A tongue-in-cheek reference to the theoretical concerns of the period, Rosler’s performance shows the artist standing in a kitchen, facing her video camera and listing an alphabet of cooking utensils. First putting on her apron, and then taking a bowl, Rosler enacted progressively more violent actions, slashing the air with her knife, and stabbing the space between herself and her camera vigorously with a sharp-pronged meat fork.<sup>34</sup>

As she performed a breaking-down of its language, the structures of domestic labour were subverted, a breakdown performed through Rosler’s bodily wielding of the kitchen’s own tools of labour. The artist’s gestures attacked the central space of domestic life, a space of feminised work, and one in which familial relationships are forged. Rosler drew attention to the maternal quality of the space, as she included the word ‘mother’ clearly discernible in the background, conjuring an inter-generational

<sup>31</sup> See Arlene Raven’s account of the collaborative art project ‘Womanhouse’ in Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (eds), *The Power of Feminist Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994), p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> See Lois Banner’s discussion of domestic life in America, in *Women in Modern America - A Brief History* (San Diego, CA & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), and Rachel Bowlby’s ‘Domestication’, in Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (eds), *Feminism Beside Itself* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Martha Rosler has recently performed a contemporary version of this piece at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (20 November 2003). Re-locating her domesticised performance within the space of the gallery, Rosler also expanded the piece to include other performers, becoming an interactive and collaborative event.

<sup>34</sup> It is interesting that in another recent exhibition of *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, as part of the ‘Video Acts’ exhibition of early video-art at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (30 July-9 October 2003), Rosler’s piece was placed outside of the main gallery spaces. Enclosed within the restaurant section of the space—an area which is not always accessible during the main galleries’ opening hours—and played back on a loop on a standard-size domestic television set bracketed up high on a wall above the restaurant’s tables, Rosler’s video was shown without the accompanying soundtrack. Whilst most of the other eighty or so other videos included in the show had earphones so that the soundtrack from the original video might be heard, it is strange that Rosler’s soundtrack was omitted, as it is fundamental to the meaning of the work. As whole rooms were dedicated to the respective videos of Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, it is surprising that Rosler’s only piece on show was relegated to the domestic (and thus



relationship through which psychic structures are formed and de-formed, the space of interaction in which femininity is produced. Throughout the piece, Rosler's voice remained level and calm, a deadpan intonation at odds with the increasingly uncontrolled gestures she made with the kitchen utensils. Language remained intact, but its referential relationship to the objects she brandished became loosened, made strange, a psychotic disconnection of the sign and its material referent. Whilst invoking a hysterical, or at least melodramatic conception of femininity, the rationality of Rosler's spoken discourse maintained her position as artistic producer, with her role as feminine subject of domesticity becoming the barely suppressed, uncontrollable underside to this speaking subject. By maintaining a calm speaking position, Rosler held in tension her role as artistic subject and her performed role of the pseudo-Victorian hysteric, gently mocking both the structures of theory, and the banality of feminine domestic labour.

What is interesting to consider in relation to Woodman's photographic practice, is the way in which Rosler's breakdown of domesticity is also enacted at the level of artistic technique, as an echo of violence carried out on the medium. On the video, as she brandishes her knife, swiping through the air of her staged kitchen, Rosler's gestures also seem to attack the imaged space, the space recorded on the surface of the videotape. A medium embedded within domestic space, and within family life of the period, the fragile film of the tape seems threatened by the knife's sharp blade, introducing the menacing possibility of a physical rupture of the medium's support, performed through the artist's hystericised acting-out. It is within this idea of performing a bodily rupture of the medium that Woodman's manipulation of the theme of domesticity seems to relate to this moment of 1970s practice. So much of Woodman's photography hinges on domestic imagery, as she manipulated her settings to evoke a specific notion of an abandoned, desecrated domesticity which she further attacked from within the limits of the photographic medium. Perhaps, like Rosler's video breakdown, Woodman's photographic constructions of an archaicised domesticity can be interpreted as highly-staged performative gestures, in which her tracing of a similar disruption echoes the way in which she used her body to rupture the photographic medium's limits.

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feminised) space of the restaurant, and that the artist was denied the voice through which the work's meaning is produced.



Perhaps, then, the theme of domesticity with which Woodman seemed so fascinated was not so much about physical confinement, or the way in which feminine subjectivity is produced within the imprisoning strictures of the domestic role, but rather was used in an analogous relationship to photography itself, to echo the ways in which the subject is objectified in the moment of representation. It is through the staging of a sense of loss or abandonment, that this critique of the process of self-absenting necessary in the moment of self-imaging is brought to the fore in her staging of an archaic, decaying domestic space. Time and time again Woodman chose old and forsaken spaces for the setting of her photographs, spaces relinquished by human inhabitants. Many of the architectural sites Woodman found had been literally abandoned, persisting in the urban stage as overlooked or forgotten spaces, disused and obsolete. In Rome and other towns and villages in Italy, Woodman visited ruined churches, sometime stripping off and positioning herself for her camera against the various backdrops of deteriorating ancient mosaics, decaying walls and flaking frescos. Later in New York, she sneaked into the premises of a disused cinema on the Lower East Side to use its once glorious stalls as the stage-set for a number of the fashion-oriented shots she took at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>35</sup>

The once-modern space of this disused cinema brings to mind the terms with which Walter Benjamin described the Surrealist notion of the 'outmoded'. Recognising the way in which in the pages of *Nadja*, André Breton's text is haunted by objects and situations which seem defined by a sense of mournful obsolescence, Benjamin describes how certain objects are haunted by their own anachronicity. Taking as his examples the first factories, grand pianos, the fading vogue of a recently fashionable restaurant, and, interestingly, the "earliest photos", Benjamin describes these objects as things "that have begun to be extinct".<sup>36</sup> With their use value or human interest lost, these "godforsaken" and abandoned spaces and states persist, haunting the temporal moment in which they have become repressed.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> These photographs form part of an extensive body of work Woodman produced after graduation as she started to put together a portfolio of fashion photographs, which she used to try to gain employment as a photographer's assistant. Although unsuccessful in her bid to try and work with celebrated contemporary fashion photographer Deborah Turbeville, she did secure some positions with less celebrated working photographers, whose details, unfortunately, have now been forgotten. Information supplied by George Woodman (in conversation with the author, New York, April 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, (trans. Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter) (London: NLB, 1979), p. 229.



Hal Foster picks up on this notion of disruption, and invokes Freud's essay on 'the Uncanny' to illustrate the way in which the outmoded object draws attention to its own temporal displacement. Referring to the way in which Freud interpreted the 'uncanny' object as something which has been unsuccessfully repressed, returning to consciousness as a sense of haunting but strangely familiar disquiet, Foster describes the way in which the Surrealist outmoded object reveals its own mode and moment of production.<sup>38</sup> As one example of this, Foster outlines the way in which the carefully carved construction of Breton's wooden slipper spoon brings to mind the moment of its own hand-crafted production, which is at odds with the temporal moment of its resurfacing in the flea market. The flea market frames this moment of uncanny return, as it is a liminal space in which "the temporally outmoded comes to rest in the spatially marginal".<sup>39</sup> Out of place in this temporal moment of its finding, the slipper spoon also retains the mark of the hand that made it.<sup>40</sup> As Breton's *Nadja* was a text within which Woodman found a wealth of inspiration throughout her career, it is tempting to consider her habit of scouring the flea markets of downtown New York as evidence of the artist's desire to follow in the footsteps of the Surrealist artists she admired, as she explored these marginal space in her endless search for her own found objects.

But what interests me here is the way in which the language of the outmoded interweaves with a language of photography, of loss and abandonment, of displacement and fading or confused temporality. I am not suggesting that Woodman's photographs should be considered as outmoded objects, contrived by an artist working within a Surrealist tradition of representation, but that the temporal frames of reference inscribed within her imagery evoke—or recreate—a memory of outmoded process. Like the slipper spoon, whose very existence seems to signify its own repression, and its own irruption within the space of representation, Woodman's photographs draw attention to their own method of production, a method in which moments of the history of the photographic process are somehow revealed, or remembered. Staging her photographs within the abandoned house, Woodman not only draws attention to the house's uncanny aspect, as it appears to be a forgotten space in which human traces have been repressed,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Foster relates this to the notion of uncanny return, not in the individual, but in a social register; as if recovering repressed historical moments and precapitalist modes of production, the Surrealist 'outmoded' becomes a means of recuperation, and a means of disrupting the "socioeconomic complacency of its present moment." See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 157-191.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 164.



but also infuses her imagery with a similarly disruptive sense of time. I want to argue that Woodman takes the photograph itself as her outmoded found object, manipulating the contemporary potential of the medium in order to re-enact within its field moments of process from the past.<sup>41</sup> As if re-photographing those 'earliest photos' which Benjamin recognised as being so mournfully inscribed with the outmoded nature of their own production, Woodman conjures the ghostly traces of anachronistic processes that persist to haunt her work.

In the 'House' series, this haunted quality seems almost too obvious, as if staged in order to illustrate Freud's explication of the way the *heimlich* becomes conflated and intimately merged with its opposite, to form the uncanny *unheimlich*. Constructed in a language of the home and the family, the uncanny is imbricated within domestic space.<sup>42</sup> Although abandoned, this house retains traces of its domestic history, as if not all of its homely characteristics could be fully repressed. The house Woodman chose was one of a number of vacant lots in Providence, which had been abandoned by its family during a period of economic downturn.<sup>43</sup> Emptied of human presence, its interiors were left to decay, its once ornate surfaces and decorative details mouldering and ravaged by neglect. Exaggerating the uncanny aspect of the space, elements of the once-comfortable domesticity linger in the rooms of the vacated house, evidence of the way in which Woodman seemed fascinated by those spaces in which humanity has disappeared, leaving traces of its dwelling behind. Remains of human occupancy are carefully recorded, or perhaps artfully contrived. In fig. 1.1, whilst the wallpaper peels away from the plaster, and the paint is pitted and blistering, the warm glint of the brass knobs on the doors seems to bear witness to a human presence, the untarnished shine suggestive of a continuing and sensuous tactile contact. In *House #3* (fig. 1.2), the burnt out matches that litter the floor evoke a hand lighting the now bricked up hearth, whilst

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<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, Foster discusses the 'unheimlich' collages of Max Ernst, and states that his use of found imagery from the past constructs his imagery as in the register of the uncanny, as they make use of "once familiar representations made strange by modern repression". Found particularly in his use of nineteenth century imagery of the Victorian home, Ernst's collages evoke a notion of domestic space that is "distanced in time" at the same time as it is literally dislocated through the fragmented format of collage. As Foster also notes the way in which Breton described collages as 'slits in time', the irruption and breaking down of a temporal framework engendered in such acts of representation brings to mind the way in which the photographic 'cut' is also implicated within a similarly dislocating temporal framework. See Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, pp. 168 & 176.

<sup>42</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' (1919), (trans. James Strachey), Standard Edition, vol. 17, pp. 221-226. This notion of domestic space is extended by Freud, when he suggests that the most uncanny site of all is the body of the mother, whose genitals and womb are "the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings' (p. 245).

<sup>43</sup> Information supplied by George Woodman (in conversation with the author, New York, March 2001).



in *House #4* (fig. 1.3) the lines of the clapboard facing of the house next door are glimpsed through the windows, creating a sense of close familiarity and neighbourly proximity. In this shot, the floral patterning of the wallpaper is clear, the large forms of the lilies evocative of a former moment of carefully chosen interior décor.

These last-remaining vestiges of the house's former status as familial home work together to heighten the uncanny quality of the space, creating a disquieting sense of disorder which Woodman herself must have carefully exaggerated through her manipulation of the setting and its domestic props. For *House #4*, Woodman may have had to pull away the surround of the fireplace from the wall, and tilt it back again at a skewed angle, so as to create the space in which her body could crawl. By opening and closing doors, as in fig. 1.1, or taking the door off its hinges and propping it against the jamb of the door frame, as in another related photograph from the time (fig. 1.14), Woodman manipulated the architectural relics of the neglected space to suggest a human inhabitant, but one that is mischievous, conjuring an impishly disruptive presence.

By including herself as an ephemeral presence in this space, Woodman gives herself this disruptive role. Dressed up in a costume evocative of a long-gone era, her form is made ghostly through the photographic technique of blurring that she employs here. Whilst just glimpsed in the swish of her skirts in fig. 1.1, in *House #3* the blur consumes her whole form, the outlines of her body becoming diffuse, with only the glint of her eye remaining discernible in the haze of light. This ghostly effect is exaggerated by the positions her body takes up: in *House #3* her body shifts along the lines of the skirting boards, moving along the wall under the window, whilst in *House #4* she subsumes herself underneath the fireplace, snaking her way along the walls of the house. As if creeping around the building's edges in fear of detection, Woodman used the blurred effect to conceal herself in the margins of the interior.

Woodman's haunting presence here brings to mind a contemporary point of reference, as it evokes some of the photographs made by Ralph Eugene Meatyard, a photographer whose own idiosyncratic style and seemingly anachronistic pictorial techniques were much admired by the young artist throughout her career. Meatyard, working throughout the late 1950s and 1960s until his death in 1972, frequently explored the visual effects



offered by the photographic medium to suggest ephemeral states, and often used similarly decaying interior spaces as the backdrops for his artful manipulations and carefully staged narrative shots. The Surrealist inspired *Portrait of My Mother-in-Law* of 1957-1958 (fig. 1.15), for example, shows a male subject seated in a decrepit interior, next to the surround of a fireplace which has been uprooted and tilted back to lean displaced against the wall. The wall's peeling surface and the rubble-covered floor, along with the disordered lines of the fire surround are elements co-opted in Woodman's later house-themed series. In another shot from 1968-70 (fig. 1.16), an untitled print showing Guy Mendes in three different positions, the three figures blur together to form a reverberating hum in the upset lines and borders of the domestic bedroom in which they are staged. The result of a multiple exposure, the ephemeral translucency of the repeated figure contrasts with the overly exposed window, whose searing brightness bleaches out the form of the standing figure itself.

But a more direct connection to Woodman's haunted house can be forged with a photograph taken by Meatyard around 1969 which was later used as the cover shot for the November 1974 edition of *Artforum*, a publication to which Woodman undoubtedly had access at RISD, had she not already been familiar with the image through various exhibitions of Meatyard's work.<sup>44</sup> This black and white photograph (fig. 1.17) shows two hazy female figures posed within a derelict interior space, and captured as smeared blurs over the print's surface. The floor is covered with rubbish and what appear to be dried leaves, whilst the paint of the old fireplace in the central section of the frame peels away from its surface like parched skin. The blurred female forms, although semi-translucent and immaterial, are clearly wearing an old-fashioned style of dress, costumes that exaggerate their ghostly presence. Like Woodman's own hazy form, these figures appear like spirits moving through an abandoned archaic space. But unlike Woodman's, Meatyard's evanescent and fleeting blur was produced not through bodily motion, but through the trickery of the multiple exposure. Long a device utilised in order to create playful 'evidence' of ghostly spirits, the double exposure Meatyard

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<sup>44</sup> Meatyard's work featured in a number of group shows in the New York area during this period in the 1970s, including 'Photography in America' at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974; 'The Grotesque in Photography' at the Neikrug Gallery in 1977; 'I Shall Leave One Land Unvisited: 11 Southern Photographers' at the International Center of Photography in 1978; and 'Photographic Surrealism' at the Brooklyn Museum in 1979. An Aperture monograph (edited by James Baker Hall) was published in 1974, the same year as his artist's book entitled *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* was published by The Jargon Society (Millerton, NY).



has created produces the visual effect of a house haunted by an intangible trace of a departed human presence.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout his photographic career, Meatyard had explored the medium's potential to capture or suggest liminal states of being, as he manipulated his camera to record figures in blurs of light, or hazy double exposures. Often using his own children, as in an untitled shot from 1960 (fig. 1.18), Meatyard used light to suggest ephemeral, spiritual states. In this shot, one of his children is caught in the act of jumping from the dark space of a loft window, his arms held high and blurred in motion to create the effect of fluttering wings, as of an angel falling to earth.<sup>46</sup> The falling figure's diffuse outline contrasts with the crisply denoted contours of the second child to the right of the image, whose focused materiality seems more concrete. Woodman herself had used her camera in a similar way, freezing subjects in free-fall to evoke immaterial states. Demonstrated most explicitly in a series of photographs made in 1977, which were collected together as a small book entitled *On Being an Angel*, Woodman and her collaborator Sloan Rankin dressed up in diaphanous white gowns and gauzy fabrics and pictured themselves jumping in space and hanging from door frames. One shows Rankin as if floating in mid-air, whilst another (fig. 1.19) shows Woodman herself jumping. Her arms are held tight against her body, whilst in the background two floaty fabric wing-shapes hover, suspended from the ceiling of the studio, two angel's wings from which the artist's body is just displaced.

Blurring here is a visual tool through which the angel's immaterial presence is evoked, a means of suggesting spiritualised states of being, the effects of which are ultimately derived from the performative gesture of moving the body in space. As the exposing light infiltrates the outlines of the body and dissolves the tight focus of the sharply-defined print, its status as the medium through which the photograph and its indexical material referent are linked, becomes loosened. Dissolving the material body, the effect seems well suited to the evocation of liminal moments between life and death. Another artist admired by Woodman, Duane Michals, was throughout the late 1960s and 1970s working with serial photography and text, and frequently explored these themes, most

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<sup>45</sup> There has been some recent literature on ghost images and photographic manipulations published in *Art Journal*; see particularly Mark Alice Durant's 'The Blur of the Otherworldly', *Art Journal*, vol. 62, no. 3 (Fall 2003).

<sup>46</sup> See Judith Keller's notes on this photograph in *Ralph Eugene Meatyard* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2002), p. 60.

explicitly in a photo-sequence from 1969 entitled *Death Comes to the Old Lady* (fig. 1.20).<sup>47</sup> Blurring becomes the technique through which such a moment of passage is expressed visually: in the series of five shots, an old lady sits in the centre of the frame, and is visited by a dark-suited old man who moves progressively further forward in the frame, the figure of death personified as the old lady's own aged peer. Appearing on the left of the shot, the old man become increasingly blurred, until in the final shot he has disappeared, his own blurred presence replaced by the image of the old lady herself in motion, captured in the moment of vigorously standing or sitting. Expressive of a transitional spiritual state, the blurred loss of the image's detail reflects the staged loss of the subject herself.

Woodman's interest in Michals' work is perhaps most evident in her own exploration of blurred effects to describe similar effects, in her *Angels* shots, and in very early works, such as a photograph taken in Boulder, Colorado, between 1972 and 1975 (fig. 1.21). Here Woodman has captured herself naked, crawling through the cruciform opening in the headstone of a grave, her presence wholly immaterial, suggestive of a ghostly spirit rising from the earth. The graveyard setting at once suggests the possibility of such ghostly presences, a haunted site of absented humanity that finds its domestic counterpart in the idea of the abandoned house.

Like Meatyard, Woodman used her camera to create such a spooked, possessed space, and the visual resonance between the two seem obvious. Both artists staged their female subjects wearing old-fashioned costumes, and captured them as glimpses of human presence within these forsaken domestic spaces. But unlike the blurred figures portrayed in Michals' series, and in the haunted image made by Meatyard, Woodman performs the role herself. Whilst Meatyard maintained his position as unseen photographer, giving his female model her costume, positioning her in place, and exposing his negative to capture her doubled image, Woodman relinquished her own authorial position as producer of the image. Her own bodily evacuation seems to be traced in the photograph as a blur, which is not a double exposure, not the result of a creative trick or manipulation. Woodman's effect was created in the relatively long exposure times necessary in the unlit space of the abandoned house, as the movement in

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<sup>47</sup> Duane Michals was an artist whom Woodman admired, particularly for his use of photographic series and sequences, often with accompanying texts. Michals' use of narrative photography was at the time



which her own body is captured evidences her own bodily displacement as she took up her position in front of the camera. Tracing a performative gesture, Woodman's blurred body points to her hurried taking up of her position as her camera's timer whirred down to zero. Whether or not Woodman was alone in taking these shots we will never know: whilst she usually used a self-timer, there were many occasions in which friends and colleagues themselves tripped the shutter, and the creepy atmosphere of this deserted space may well have prompted Woodman to take along a friend for support. Whatever the reality of the situation, the body captured as a blur of motion cannot help but dramatise the action of the artist as she slipped from behind her camera, as she crawled along under the sill of the window, or dived under the fireplace to explore the space of her photographs with her own body.

By capturing this moment of passage, in which the body of the artist was transubstantiated as she evacuated the position behind her camera, Woodman's photographs become invested with both the temporality of the action and a performative intention, evidence of the artist's own desire to include within her work some element of her own subjectivity.<sup>48</sup> As Rosalind Krauss has noted, Woodman obsessively used herself—both body and image—in order to work through the 'problem sets' that may have been assigned as part of the photographer's formalist art education at RISD.<sup>49</sup> According to Krauss, Woodman could not help but literally get herself in the picture, using her soft, fleshy form to explore and perhaps upset the technical limits of the photographic medium. Krauss imagines the 'House' series as the result of such a problem set, the answer to a prescribed exercise in which the students were perhaps asked to "picture something familiar, their own rooms, for example".<sup>50</sup> The resulting prints are symptomatic of Woodman's working practice, and her desire to internalise the

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unusual, and may have been the impetus for Woodman's own frequent exploration of sequential formats and narrative, most explicitly evidenced in her production of a number of artist's books.

<sup>48</sup> Critic Max Kozloff discusses the way in which Woodman used the technique of blurring in relation to work by (amongst others) Mary Beth Edelson, Michals and Meatyard. As a young photographer in New York, Woodman met Kozloff some time around 1980, and he was one of the earliest critics to support her work. His interpretations of her work within the context of 1970s photographic practice remain some of the most interesting to date; see especially his discussion of photographic manipulations of motion in the essay 'The Etherealized Figure and the Dream of Wisdom' which appeared in the exhibition catalogue *Vanishing Presence* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center & New York: Rizzoli, 1989), which has subsequently been reprinted in his *Lone Visions, Crowded Frames – Essays on Photography* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

<sup>49</sup> See Krauss' essay 'Problem Sets', in *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1999), p. 162.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.



abstract formal problems of the exercise, in a way that “subjectivized it, [and] rendered it as personal as possible”.<sup>51</sup>

By figuring her own body as a ghostly presence reminiscent of the one Meatyard created through multiple exposure, Woodman’s strategy of personalisation or subjectivising seems obvious here. Rather than using a model to jump into position to create the haunting blur inscribed on an already exposed negative, Woodman used her own body to act out a similar effect. And the results were sometimes remarkably similar: Meatyard’s female figures are echoed by Woodman’s own bodily form in another related photograph, which has been given the title of *Polka Dots* (fig. 1.22).<sup>52</sup> Just as Meatyard’s doubly exposed figure stands with her arms held down just apart from her body, in her photograph Woodman has situated herself in a similar position in the frame, her arms held in a pose reminiscent of that held by Meatyard’s model. Although her face is obscured as a smudge of dirtied light, the position of her feet suggests that she faces away from the camera toward the background wall, as does one of the figures in Meatyard’s shot. Recalling another photographic study by Clementina Hawarden, in which a young woman in a spotted dress is imaged facing a wall (fig. 1.23), the mottled patterning of her costume becoming merged with the wallpaper itself, Woodman’s own subject seems to disappear.<sup>53</sup> Whilst Hawarden achieved this effect through the juxtaposition of echoing patterns, and Meatyard through the use of double-exposure, Woodman used her own body to perform the visual effect of dissolution. Capturing herself in vibrating, fluctuating motion, the dark forms of polka-dot patterning on her dress appear to echo the pits and marks on the wall behind, creating the illusion of bodily translucency.

Such an example of illusory dissolution could be interpreted as evidence of what Margaret Sundell sees as the strength of Woodman’s work, as the artist repeatedly managed to “simultaneously create and explode the fragile membrane that protects one’s identity from being absorbed by its surroundings”.<sup>54</sup> Invoking Roger Caillois’ discussion of animal mimicry, Sundell suggests that the artistic deployment of a strategy

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>52</sup> This title has, as with others, been given to the work posthumously by Woodman’s estate, and relates it to a set of photographs which have been grouped together as they all depict the artist wearing a particular polka-dot patterned dress. Although Woodman never collected these images together in a comprehensive series or sequential format, some of the prints still bear her own hand-written inscription of ‘polka dots’.

<sup>53</sup> See Mavor’s discussion of Hawarden’s image in *Becoming*, p. 55.

<sup>54</sup> Sundell, ‘Vanishing Points’, pp. 437–438.



of camouflage might draw attention to a subjectivity in the ongoing process of self-creation, poised on the constant brink of assimilation into her surroundings. Woodman's self-representations function like so many Lacanian mirrors, in which the sharp click of her camera's shutter "resounds like an incantation", articulating a repetitive, reassuring and exhausting "I am, I am, I am". Self-confirming, but inherently unstable and always on the verge of regression, the subject's boundaries threaten to dissolve, collapsing back into nothingness as her self-image is devoured by space.<sup>55</sup>

But I would like to argue that Woodman's technique here, rather than invoking the incessant rapidity of the shutter's click necessary to a project of self-definition produced through repetitive, multiple imaging, denotes a different sense of temporality. Rather than the rapid firing of the camera's shutter, by capturing herself as a hazy blur, Woodman's imagery of self invokes a strangely ambiguous temporality, one defined by concomitant slowing and quickening. A kind of 'passage', rather than a simple 'cut', the temporality of the moment of exposure here becomes at once drawn out and somehow hurried. As it is testament to both a quickened bodily movement and a slight slowing of the shutter speed, the blurred form of Woodman's self-image draws attention to the movement of the artist's body through the space and time framed by the attenuated moment of the photograph's exposure. It is in this sense of temporal manipulation that Woodman's technique awakens the memory of past process, as by figuring herself as a blur of motion, Woodman uses her self-image as the site on which she re-stages the extended moments of exposure necessary in the 'earliest photos'. Her fluctuating presence (and disappearance into absence) within this series is not simply that of an ephemeral figure haunting an old forsaken house, but a trace of her own photographic process, a ghost which haunts the spaces of the photographic medium itself.

It is not then the idea of the abandoned house haunted by its lost occupants that is interesting here, but the way in which Woodman uses the house to frame the field of the photograph, a space onto which she traces the 'shadow' of the medium itself. Using her body to perform the effect of an outmoded moment of procedure, Woodman's photographs are haunted by the memory of their own production, drawing attention to

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 438; see also Roger Caillois' influential essay 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', reprinted in Annette Michelson (ed.) *October – The First Decade 1976-1986* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).



her role in the making of the image. Woodman's technique becomes a kind of artfully contrived archaic referent, as the hazy diffusion which recurs throughout this series reawakens the memory of anachronistic photographic procedure. Having broken into the house in Providence, Woodman would have loaded her film, steadied her camera on the stable support of the tripod, and set the shutter speed to permit an exposure time of perhaps one or two whole seconds, a relatively long period in which the negative's light-sensitive emulsion was revealed to soak up the dim available light. Adjusting her costume, and setting the self-timer, Woodman took up her position beneath the window-frame or under the fireplace, just moving in the extended moment of exposure, a moment in which any camera shake or bodily motion would have been recorded. The softly blurred results draw attention to the nature of the process, exaggerating the hazy qualities intrinsic to the practice of the 'time exposure'. Unlike the quick shutter-click suggested by the instant of the 'snap-shot', Woodman's blurred motion brings to vision a drawn-out, attenuated moment of the photograph's production, which here resonates with an anachronistic method.

When thinking about the distant origins of photography—those 'earliest photos'—Walter Benjamin noticed the ways in which the temporality of the medium had changed as it had advanced during the first decades of the twentieth century. For in the early days of photographic portraiture, when the plates' low light-sensitivity demanded extensive periods of exposure often in stronger outdoor daylight, Benjamin noted that these old lengthy exposure times offered to the subject under the camera's gaze a moment of reverie, of quiet solitude and reflection. Unlike the rapidity of the modern-day photograph, characterised by the split second of the snap-shot in which motion is frozen and broken down, in the archaic practice of the exaggerated time exposure temporal progression seemed momentarily stilled. The procedure—always awkward and often uncomfortable—caused the subject under the camera's suspended open-eyed gaze "to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it".<sup>56</sup> In this liminal moment, outside of the continuum of everyday life, a space of subjectivity is framed: in this moment, the subject, as it were, "grew into the picture".<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography' (1931), reprinted in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, (trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter) (London: NLB, 1979), p. 245.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



Benjamin's use of the word 'focus' to describe this moment of self-reflection of course plays on its photographic connection, referencing a technical consideration on which the medium's ideal aesthetic 'perfection' has long been seen to depend. Unavoidably lost in the long, drawn-out exposure time necessary for these early plates, focus breaks down, becoming diffuse as each bodily movement is exaggerated, each facial twitch recorded, and lines become softened, features undefined, betraying what Kozloff describes as the "flawed immobility" of the pose.<sup>58</sup> But whilst the exact transcription of likeness may be subtly distorted, rather than disappearing in the drastic cut suggested in the quick-fire shutter speeds of, for example, the motion-stopping press photograph, the subject seems to bloom, to 'become' him- or herself in the drawn out moment of exposure. Framing a moment in which the subject becomes, or evolves, these early time exposures function as spaces of subjectivity, in which selfhood becomes condensed, albeit in a fleeting haze of blur.

Of course, the exposure times with which Woodman was dealing in the 1970s were far shorter than those necessary to expose the fragile and delicate plates of the early nineteenth century, as the gloomy natural light in the rooms of this old building demanded exposure times of no more than two seconds at the very most. But, there is a sense in which her carefully crafted old-fashioned imagery seems to invoke or reawaken a memory of these long-outmoded practices, as if her own modern-day counterparts are themselves haunted by the early mechanisms of the medium. And so, whilst her own vintage-style clothing, her use of soft-toned black and white prints and the decayed grandeur of her chosen period settings combine to produce the visualisation of the artist's own temporal phantasy, it is her use of the time exposure that also unconsciously infuses her manipulation of the medium itself with a rich history of outmoded procedure.

In an essay from 1978, contemporaneous with Woodman's photographic training, Thierry de Duve discusses the differing qualities of the 'snap-shot' and the 'time

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<sup>58</sup> Kozloff, in the *Artforum* article illustrated by the Meatyard cover shot, notes the legacy of the blurred photographic effect, pointing out the technique's relationship to nineteenth-century pictorialist photography. Blur is described as evidence of a "flawed immobility", a breaking down of the static pose necessary in the long exposure times of early photographic portraiture. Tracing a bodily motion, the blur stands as the antithesis of the composure of the artfully staged portrait; reawakened in Meatyard's hazy, ephemeral presences, the blurred form re-emerges in contemporary practice to produce an "expressive quickening", evocative of a subject in motion, a living, moving, breathing subject evading the devastating



exposure'.<sup>59</sup> Exemplified by the stop-action press photograph, the snap-shot of modern photography grew out of the early experiments of investigative photographers such as Eadward Muybridge, whose rapid-firing multiple serial shots served to break down motion, revealing in an invisible instant what Benjamin called the "optical unconscious".<sup>60</sup> Exposing to vision what the naked eye might never imagine, the snap-shot stops motion, cutting into the temporal fabric to extricate its subject from the continuum of life itself.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast, the 'time exposure' luxuriates in the moment of composition, of motion stilled and life slowed-down. Exemplified by the funerary portrait, but also enveloping all categories of portrait and still-life, the temporality evoked in this carefully posed, framed and composed shot is one of attenuation, in which time becomes momentarily stilled, as if slowing down for that patiently anticipated period in which the negative's light-sensitive emulsion is opened up to light. Unavoidable in early photographic procedures, in which delicate plates demanded lengthy exposure times in order for light to register the image, the technique resulted in portraits in which any movement—of the camera, or of the subject under it's gaze—was recorded as a soft blur, a hazy smear on the negative's blank field.

According to de Duve, the time exposure "petrifies" the time of the original gesture captured in the photograph, denoting it as "departed".<sup>62</sup> Freed from the temporality of the photograph, that fragment of departed time is experienced as a recurring, autonomous moment, as it is staged "again and again in memory".<sup>63</sup> And whilst the aesthetic ideal of the instantaneous cut of the snap-shot is sharpness, as the precise recording of detail seems to echo the print's own temporal frame of reference, the sense of loss invested in the time exposure, in contrast, finds its ideal expression in the slightly *out-of-focus* print.

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excision of the camera's freeze-frame cut. See Kozloff, 'Meatyard', *Artforum*, vol. XIII, no. 3 (November 1974), p. 71.

<sup>59</sup> See Thierry de Duve, 'Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox', *October* 5 (Summer 1978).

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', p. 243.

<sup>61</sup> See Philippe Dubois' discussion of the photographic *coupe* in *L'Acte Photographique et Autre Essais* (Brussels: Labor, 1990), which is discussed at length in relation to Woodman's staging of 'self-cutting' in the third chapter of this thesis.

<sup>62</sup> de Duve, 'Time Exposure and Snapshot', p. 116.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*



To illustrate his point, De Duve cites as a classic example of this aesthetic haze a portrait by Julia Margaret Cameron, another Victorian 'domestic' photographer, whose 1867 portrait of Thomas Carlyle shows the subject's profile in the whispered suggestion of movement, as if coming out of the darkness of the background (fig. 1.24).<sup>64</sup> The gentle blur of the subject's surroundings in this nineteenth century exemplar acts as a metaphor for the "fading of time", a kind of photographic chiaroscuro which loosens the "fabric of time", and in which the material object's image comes and goes, summoned into presence as it simultaneously fades into absence.<sup>65</sup> By picturing a waning subjective presence, the photograph produced in the time exposure becomes a "consoling object", provoking a state of mourning, a process which is built into its semiotic structure, as the reading of such an image is bound up with the "ebb and flow of memory".<sup>66</sup> To Barthes' categorisation of the photographic conjunction of the *here* and the *formerly*, a spatio-temporal confusion which de Duve assigns to the snap-shot, de Duve adds the time exposure's own paradoxical space-time — that of the *now* and *there*.<sup>67</sup> As an indexical medium, the photograph's referent is never completely detached from its signifier, provoking a spectatorial experience bound up with memory and mourning, as the imaged subject is irrecoverably lost, but somehow still there, lingering on in the 'now' re-constituted in the moment of spectatorial encounter.

Whilst de Duve's interpretation echoes the feminised account of photography Barthes describes in the page of *Camera Lucida*, Carol Armstrong develops this relationship between the maternal feminine subject and the image.<sup>68</sup> As Armstrong has discussed, Cameron's photography has become invested with a language of femininity, the gendering of her practice grounded particularly in her manipulation of focus.<sup>69</sup> Cameron's out-of-focus portraits are read as an indication of an intrinsically 'feminine' photographic style, a 'hysterical' lack of technical 'mastery' which went hand in hand with her similarly slovenly domestic management.<sup>70</sup> Her 'amateur' aesthetic is denoted

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<sup>64</sup> See Carol Armstrong's discussion of the work of Julia Margaret Cameron in 'Cupid's Pencil of Light: Julia Margaret Cameron and the Maternalization of Photography', *October* 76 (Spring 1996).

<sup>65</sup> de Duve, 'Time Exposure and Snap Shot', p. 121.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 117; and Roland Barthes, 'The Rhetoric of the Image', *Image/Music/Text* (trans. Stephen Heath) (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 44.

<sup>68</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage Books, 1993), originally published as *La Chambre Claire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980); and Carol Armstrong's discussion of the text in her essay, 'From Clementina to Käsebier: The Photographic Attainment of the "Lady Amateur"', *October* 91 (Winter 2000).

<sup>69</sup> See Armstrong, 'Cupid's Pencil of Light'.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

in her lack of focus, her choice of technically ‘incorrect’ lenses producing the shallow depth of field and all-over haze that characterise many of her portraits, such as the one referenced by de Duve. Evidenced in the prints themselves—in the “traces of the uneven flow of collodion across her glass negative, along with the strands of hair caught in the emulsion and the cracks in the plate found in others”—Cameron’s aesthetic draws attention to the print’s production, the “magic of the photograph’s making”, as the image gestates in the “womb of chemistry”.<sup>71</sup>

Woodman seems to have shared a similar disregard, contempt even, for the ‘proper’ rules of the medium itself. Preferring her work to have a more homely, personalised quality, as well as insisting that she use her own body and subjectivity to disrupt the ordered geometry and formalist strictures of her RISD art-education, Woodman also seemed actively to invite a hand-crafted, messy aesthetic at odds with the pseudo-scientific conditions of the darkroom itself. Woodman’s close friend and frequent collaborator Sloan Rankin “never had the impression that photography was really the medium best suited for her”.<sup>72</sup> As she put it: “[m]ost photographers prefer a dust-free neatness, but it seemed to me that Francesca was most at home in dust. (She also had a special fondness for mold)”.<sup>73</sup> Many of Woodman’s prints are marked with the ink she used to write her own journals, and specks of dust and strands of hair leave their mark on her negatives. Just as the sites Woodman chose as the settings for her photographs echo those used by ‘domestic’ photographers such as Cameron and Hawarden, so the spaces in which Woodman chose to live and work also collapsed the distinctions between professional artistic studio and the domestic space of the home. As a young high school student at Abbott Academy boarding school in Andover, Massachusetts, she utilised her bedroom as a darkroom, moving out her bed and relegating it to a cupboard, both displacing and interposing the spaces of work and sleep.<sup>74</sup> When she later became a student at RISD, she combined her living space with her studio, and whilst she had little furniture or decoration, the props which find their way into so many of her photographs must have created a curiously out of place domesticity in her space of creative work. It is not then surprising that her artistic props became the things with

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<sup>71</sup> Armstrong, ‘From Clementina to Käsebier’, p. 122.

<sup>72</sup> See Sloan Rankin’s memories in her essay ‘Peach Mumble – Ideas Cooking’ in Hervé Chandès (ed.), *Francesca Woodman* (Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain & Zurich-Berlin-New York: Scalo, 1998), p. 34.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> See the biographical notes included in Chandès (ed.), *Francesca Woodman*, p. 154.



which she surrounded herself in everyday life, and that her domestic utensils and homely furnishings became the recurring details of background interest found in many of her photographs. Her own domestic space and her space of creative work became conflated, lending a tangible domesticity to many of her subsequent photographs, and her darkroom—as a space of professional production—becomes embroiled within domestic space. A space of chemical magic, but also of careful measuring, mixing and pouring, and of rinsing and cleaning, Woodman's domesticised darkroom, located within the heart of what was also her home, evokes the feminised labour of cooking and cleaning, investing her photographic practice with a homely quality reminiscent of the 'lady' Victorian photographers themselves.<sup>75</sup>

In this series, it is the detail of these (un)domestic surroundings which becomes the paradoxical focus of the work. Unlike Cameron's hazed and shallow backgrounds, Woodman's own surroundings are perfectly described. In *House #3*, every detail of the room is pictured in sharp focus, each shard and scrap littering the floor clearly visible, and all the pits and pock-marks on the scarred wall carefully recorded. Displaced from the surroundings onto her own body, Woodman's use of blur is highly localised, specific to her own form, and acted out with her own body. Tracing a performative gesture, each blurred representation is linked intimately to both her body and her role in authorial production, inscribing the effect with an indelible trace of feminine subjectivity. Describing a self always just out of focus, just out of grasp, the subjectivity Woodman represents is one present but materially absent, as if drawing attention to the loss of the originary gesture she performed.<sup>76</sup>

So, whilst Cameron's soft-focus is the result of the mechanical 'failings' of her apparatus, Woodman's more explicit blur is produced through the movement of her own body. And whilst Cameron's all-over haze is interpreted by Lindsay Smith as a kind of proto-feminist procedure through which the camera's fetishising gaze is halted, barred and trapped in the shallow depth of field, Woodman's own manipulation of light goes

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<sup>75</sup> See Armstrong, 'From Clementina to Käsebier', p. 103.

<sup>76</sup> For a discussion of the use of the body and photography in 1970s practice, see Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index', *October* 3 & 4 (Spring & Fall 1977); and Amelia Jones' more recent re-evaluation of body-related performance and photography entitled *Body Art – Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, MN & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

further in upsetting such a desiring look.<sup>77</sup> Having nowhere to rest, the gaze falling upon Cameron's soft outlines is subjected to a "perpetual unease".<sup>78</sup> The gaze on Woodman's imaged body, however, has nothing to latch onto. Although only just betrayed in her hand gesture and the hushed swish of her skirts in fig. 1.1, the blur consumes most of her body in *House #3*, leaving only a hint of focus in the glint of her eye. Her face hidden by the tilted mantel in *House #4*, her body is restlessly blurred, whilst in the related *Polka Dots* photograph no trace of her individuality or specific subjectivity is apparent at all. Not so much stopped short by shallow depth of field, or left to roam through a plane of all-over lack of focus, the gaze directed onto Woodman's blurred form is subjected to a kind of slippage. With no tightly focused anchor, the gaze is displaced from the artist's body, slipping away as the spectator can no longer maintain a visual hold.

The gaze on Woodman's imaged female subject can never fetishise as it cannot rest, but slips and slide from her form. Diffused and obscured, the outlines of the photographed body are undone, never confirmed or re-drawn by the photograph's flattening, phallicising pencil of light.<sup>79</sup> Uncontained by the photograph's own medium of transcription, the fluid imaged subject echoes Luce Irigaray's description of feminine subjectivity: uncontained by discourse and having no access to the means of self-definition offered by the traditional psychoanalytic constructions of subjectivity, the female subject is in a constant "state of anamorphosis in which every figure becomes fuzzy".<sup>80</sup> Using her own body to act out such an anamorphic state, most explicitly suggested by the loss of identity evoked in the *Polka Dots* photograph, Woodman's image relates this fuzzied femininity to the limits of the photographic medium itself.

For, by imaging herself in motion, the blurred result is testimony to the spatio-temporal passage of the moment of exposure, contracting the spatial referents of the image and disrupting the photograph's temporality. And the smeared appearance of this figure also seems to disrupt the surface of the print itself. Almost like a stretch, or a slur in the

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<sup>77</sup> See Lindsay Smith's interesting discussion of the fetishisation of focus in relation to nineteenth century photography in *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children and Nineteenth-Century Photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>79</sup> See Lynda Nead's discussion of 'framing' the female nude in *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>80</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'Volume-Fluidity', in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 230.



rich and resonant temporal fabric associated with any photograph, Woodman's anamorphic self-representation also undoes the technical precision of focus and 'correct' procedure. As if a painterly smudge, or a smear on the negative's sensate and fragile emulsion, a blemish on the print's own skin-like surface, Woodman's bodily registration becomes a trace of her own procedure, as if haunting the photographic field of crisp definition and perfectly exposed detail.

Upsetting the domestic space with her creeping body, and disordering its architectural limits as she peels away paper, upends doors and tilts the mantelpiece of the hearth, Woodman's gestures, whilst always exaggerating the temporal moment of the performative time exposure itself, also become symbolic of her undoing of the photograph itself. The resulting blur functions in a similar way to the traces of collodion washing over the surface of Cameron's prints. Indicators of a hand-crafted and artfully domesticated process, Woodman's blurred forms haunt the house of photography. Like a stretch in the print's skin, in which space-time is both elongated and strangely contracted, the blur re-stages a temporal disruption, a confusing collapse of the *now* and the *there*, setting in play a reflexive process of mourning. Recalling those early photos that Benjamin described in terms of an auratic register of lost time and outmoded, discarded labour, Woodman's blurred imagery seems to express the memory of its own past tense, its own historicity. Tracing an absent subject, a lost body, and a lost gesture, Woodman's self-representation as a kind of ephemeral, light-filled ghost performs a re-enactment of a lost medium. Archaic and outmoded, the temporal passage Woodman figures frames a space of memory, a space of subjectivity now haunted by time and process past.

## 2

## Second Skins

In a short piece of prose describing an early childhood memory, the poet Sylvia Plath remembered the precise instant of the realisation of her own subjectivity. During this moment of clarity, a moment ostensibly provoked by the birth of a baby brother, Plath experienced a strange displacement, as if seeing herself from outside of her own body: "As from a star", Plath wrote, "I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over".<sup>1</sup>

On this fateful day, which Plath describes as the "birthday of Otherness", the arrival of the newborn boy seems to reawaken in her the carving out of her own subjectivity from the comfort of a primitive maternal symbiosis. Suddenly aware of her own bodily borders, the sensuous surface of her skin is experienced as a wall, rigid, fortified and containing, evoking the image of a building. Lamenting the birth of her helpless rival, it is not then this 'somebody else' that she fears. It is her own separation. In the moment of extrication from the beautiful maternal fusion, her own Otherness is born. From an impossible distance, through the lens of memory, she sees her Self, *as from a star*.

Psychoanalyst Barrie Biven recognises in Plath's work as a whole an obsession with containing boundaries, expressed in this passage through the description of the skin of the body as an overly fortified, architectural shell.<sup>2</sup> Invoking the domestic space of the home, Plath describes her own boundary as a wall, a structure of simultaneous protection and division. Strangely disembodied, as if cast out from her own skin, Plath experiences her extrication from the bliss of the originary identification with the maternal subject, the beautiful fusion of the pre-Oedipal state.

The image of the maternal body is invoked throughout this short essay, as Plath describes the watery seascape that formed the backdrop to her "ocean childhood". Plath

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath, 'Ocean 1212-W'; this essay was commissioned by the BBC in late 1962 as part of a series of childhood reminiscences. Plath describes her own childhood "seascape", the "watery cradle" that was her grandmother's house. Written shortly before her death in 1963, this piece of prose was published in the collection entitled *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1977), p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> See Barrie M. Biven, 'The Role of Skin in Normal and Abnormal Development with a note on the poet Sylvia Plath', *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 9 (1982).



remembers the ebb and flow of the tide, and the “motherly pulse” and heaving “breath of the sea”. Recalling how she learned to crawl, the poet describes how she made straight for the rolling waves, pushing through a “wall of green” until stopped suddenly, as her mother grabbed at her heels, pulling her back to the safety of dry land.

Plath’s resonant descriptions of a fluid and pulsating ocean hint at a yearning for reunion with the lost maternal body, a return to origin which has been interpreted as symptomatic of the poet’s own mental state, a precursor to her suicide. Psychoanalyst Barrie Biven discerns this desire not only in this language of oceanic engulfment, but in Plath’s obsessive description of containing surfaces and boundaries, manifested as an attack on the body’s skin. Using descriptive language as a powerfully symbolic psychological construction, Plath creates a phantasy surface that Biven describes as highly “libidinized and aggressivized”, attacked by a language of violence through which the skin is somehow objectified and projected outside of her own body, becoming detached from her own subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> It is in these symbolic attacks that Biven discerns Plath’s unconscious wish to return to fusion with the pre-Oedipal maternal union, at one with the mother’s body.<sup>4</sup> The lapse into this fusion can only be reached by passing through a stage “of breathless eroticised fascination with her own body accompanied by the wish to break through the body surface. The hated and loved mother introject has to be broken into. What is acted out through the bodies of the poetic persona is the same wish to break through the skin surface to a world beyond”.<sup>5</sup>

Biven reads Plath’s verbal attacks on the skin as evidence of the way in which the operations of the poet’s own death drive are somehow traced through her words. As such, Biven’s interpretation of Plath’s imagery of skin brings to mind some of the psycho-biographical readings of Woodman’s photography. Woodman, another young, white North American woman, began to take photographs ten years after Plath’s suicide, and just as Plath’s work has been read in the shadow of her tragic death, so Woodman’s photography has been interpreted within similar limits. Analogies between the two women have been provoked by their respective suicides, most explicitly in a catalogue essay on Woodman’s work by Jen Budney from 1996.<sup>6</sup> Whilst claiming that

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.215.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.219.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See Jen Budney’s catalogue essay included in the exhibition catalogue *Francesca Woodman* (Modena: Galleria Civica, 1996), published to accompany the exhibition of Woodman’s photography curated by

drawing parallels between Woodman and Plath might seem “too easy”, too obvious, Budney goes on to discern in the photographer’s visual imagery and the poet’s descriptive language a shared desire for a return to origin, as both women “immersed themselves, we might even say overwhelmed themselves, in their environments”.<sup>7</sup> Referring particularly to those photographs taken in the old house (discussed in chapter one), and to a related image entitled *Space Squared* from 1975–1976 in which Woodman covered herself over with torn sheets of floral wallpaper (fig. 2.1), Budney concludes that although Woodman’s expression of a death-wish might be a little “less obvious” than Plath’s, her photographs are similarly personal and diaristic.<sup>8</sup> As if it were an ongoing documentary series describing a very real and painful breaking down of subjectivity, Woodman’s project of self-representation is interpreted as a relentless record of the artist’s uncomfortable mental state expressed through a gradually disintegrating relationship to her environment.

This supposed wish for a return to origin might be exemplified in many of the photographs Woodman took in the abandoned house in Providence, Rhode Island, particularly those in which the artist represented herself as an ephemeral blur, as if melting into the walls of its architecture. Like Plath’s imagery of oceanic fluidity, Woodman’s figuration of her own form merging with the containing limits of the house invokes the impression of the maternal body. The domestic home’s analogous relationship to the womb has been described by Gaston Bachelard, as he described the “material paradise” of the house in which life begins, enclosed and protected, as the “cradle” in which a subject rests before being cast out into the uncontained world outside.<sup>9</sup> The home’s bodily associations are exaggerated in Woodman’s photograph, as she positions herself between the wall’s two eye-like windows, light-filled orifices through which the world outside is just glimpsed. Covering herself over with the wall’s peeled away surface, Woodman embeds herself within the architectural structure of the home, as if getting under its own skin.

But the home described in Woodman’s photograph is uncomfortable: just as Plath’s imagery of violated skin suggests an attack on that surface, so the ‘skins’ Woodman

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Filippo Maggia at Galleria Civica di Modena, 24 November 1996 – 9 February 1997. Budney opens her essay with a poem by Sylvia Plath entitled *Words*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>9</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (trans. Maria Jolas) (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 7.



describes visually are damaged, old and worn. The interior is empty and devoid of furnishings, the walls are cracked, stained and scarred. Rather than the bliss of the comforting 'material paradise' Bachelard conjures, the maternal body invoked here seems to be imagined as ruined and desecrated, and brings to mind instead the way in which the maternal body is described by Freud in relation to the notion of the 'uncanny'.<sup>10</sup> Something which has returned from repression, the "secretly familiar" quality invested in the uncanny object or experience is exemplified in the memory of the maternal body.<sup>11</sup> Freud describes the mother's body as every subject's original home, the former *heim* which is re-experienced in consciousness as the epitome of the *unheimlich* place, the site in which the familiarity of homeliness and the strangeness of the unhomely coincide.<sup>12</sup> By placing the memory of the maternal dyad and the originary mother-subject in a discomfoting relationship to subjectivity, Freud constructs the maternal body as an uncanny space of repression and irruption. In Woodman's imagery, the maternal body invoked here seems to one imagined as a similarly haunting space of ruin and desecration, a body that has been abandoned and forsaken. Rather than suggesting a simple yearning for impossible reunion with that lost body, Woodman's imagery figures a more ambiguous and unsettling relationship.

This idea of the subject's troubled, unresolved relationship to the body of the mother is echoed throughout the work of Didier Anzieu, as during the 1970s he attempted to unravel the problematic processes of dependence and objectification which are negotiated by the newly emerging subject. For Anzieu, the skin of the mother's body becomes an interface through which that original relationship is mediated, a surface which is then internalised and overcome during psychic development, and persists as a tool through which subjectivity is maintained throughout life. Developing his notion of the 'skin ego', Anzieu described a psychic structure imagined to be like the skin of the body, which functions as both a fantasy surface of containment, and a possible site of symbolic aggression. In the eventual publication of his text as *The Skin Ego* in 1985, Anzieu included a snippet of Plath's 'Ocean 1212-W', and Biven's subsequent

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<sup>10</sup> I have discussed the notion of the 'uncanny' in relation to the desecrated house in the first chapter of this thesis.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'' (1919), (trans. James Strachey), Standard Edition, vol. 17, p. 245.

<sup>12</sup> Freud unravels the meanings of the words *heimlich* and *unheimlich* (homely and unhomely), and reveals the way in which the two terms become conflated, their seemingly opposite but coinciding meanings usefully echoing the way in which the uncanny is located at the heart of what was once familiar, but which irrupts in consciousness as defamiliarised through the processes of repression. See 'The 'Uncanny'', pp. 220-226.

interpretation of it as an epistemological preliminary to his own theorisation of subjectivity, in which the experience of the skin of the body is fundamental to the formation of the psychic borders necessary for the successful individuation of subjectivity.<sup>13</sup> Developing Freud's description of the ego as a projection of the surface of the body, Anzieu's psychoanalytic project imagines a psychic container structured like the skin.<sup>14</sup> Just as the skin contains and protects the fleshy interior of the body, so the 'skin ego' is imagined to house the processes of the unconscious mind, a transitional psychic container made use of by the pre-Oedipal child in order to extricate the newly forming Self from the original fusion with the maternal body.

In the order of phantasy, this skin-like structure persists, endlessly irrupting into consciousness throughout later life. As Anzieu states, the skin ego recurs in "phantasies, dreams, everyday speech, posture and disturbances of thought" and provides an imaginary surface on which all "phantasies, dreams, thinking and every form of psychopathological organisation is constituted".<sup>15</sup> Frequently distorted, this phantasy skin becomes the screen for the playing out of psychic dramas, as disruptions in its containing function become experienced as uneasy ego-boundaries, confused subject-object relations and phantasies of fusion with the environment, manifested through and on the skin.

It is undeniable that Woodman's frequently blurred self-representations give the visual impression of environmental fusion and unstable bodily boundaries, but by repeatedly returning to imagery of skin and other analogous surfaces, Woodman seems to use the photograph itself as such a symbolic surface, such a phantasy skin. Everywhere in Woodman's photography there is a seemingly obsessive attention to surface, as her own

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<sup>13</sup> See Didier Anzieu's *The Skin Ego*, (trans. Chris Turner) (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 19-20. Anzieu's theory was developed throughout the 1970s, and was finally published as *Le Moi-peau* (Paris: Bordas) in French in 1985, and as *The Skin Ego* in English in 1989. Other psychoanalysts working on their own skin-related theories included Esther Bick and Frances Tustin; Bick outlined the idea of the 'second skin' in 'The Experience of the Skin in Early Object Relations' in *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, vol. 49 (1968). Frances Tustin's theory of autistic encapsulation was developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and is outlined in *Autism and Childhood Psychosis* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1972). See also *The Protective Shell in Children and Adults* (London: Karnac Books, 1990), and Theodore Mitrani & Judith L. Mitrani (eds), *Encounters with Autistic States*, (Northvale, NJ & London: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1997).

<sup>14</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', (trans. James Strachey) in Standard Edition, vol. 19 (1961), p. 26; and Didier Anzieu, 'le Moi-Peau', *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* 9 (1974), pp. 195-208, quoted by Didier Houzel in 'The Concept of a Psychic Envelope' in Didier Anzieu (ed.), *Psychic Envelopes*, (trans. Daphne Briggs) (London: Karnac Books, 1990), p.54.

<sup>15</sup> Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, p.4.



skin is frequently bared for the camera, only to be artfully veiled in diaphanous fabrics, dressed up in elaborate and decorative costumes, or simply concealed with sheets and pieces of paper. One photograph, (fig. 2.2), taken whilst in Rome in 1978 shows the artist against a two-tone wall, her lower half splattered with what could be paint, or mud, or even blood, as if attempting to take on the background texture of the wall behind.<sup>16</sup> In another, (fig. 2.3), Woodman has photographed herself on the seashore, gathering fronds of dried out seaweed into the swirling folds of her skirt: one strand has been overlaid on her calf, its dried out membrane like a scabrous second skin. Woodman again used organic materials in association with her own skin in an extensive series made whilst artist in residence at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire during the summer of 1980 (fig. 2.4). Hiding the delicate skin of her wrists, fragile peelings of silver-birch bark have been moulded to form papery cuffs which stand just apart from her body, as if expelled or shed from the top layer of her own epidermis. A softer, more sensuous effect is created in some later photographs taken between 1979 and 1980 after Woodman graduated from RISD, in which naked female skin is displayed in conjunction with fur and jewellery, adornments that heighten the sensuality and sexuality of the feminine subjects (figs. 2.5 and 2.6). One shows a female body naked except for the delicate strands of pearls strung around her waist, sprawling diagonally across the frame of the photograph. The strangely distorted form of the foreshortened body rests on a pile of pale and patch-worked quilts, whose folded layers appear skin-like in their softness and plump cushioned texture. In another, the dark pelts of three long fur stoles, complete with head, tails and limbs, hang from a wire. Literally shed skins, they hang flaccid, concealing the central strip of Woodman's naked body from ear level to just above the knee, in a sexualising interplay of skin, fur and body hair, evocative of vixen cunning and a notion of fox-like feminine sexuality.

Woodman's surfaces are not merely appropriated as found textures, carefully chosen and framed for their interesting surface detail, but are always placed in a sensuous relationship to the body, particularly to the skin of her usually female subjects. Through these props, Woodman stages relationships between soft fabric, paper, organic membranes, architectural surfaces and the skin of the body, but in various states of

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<sup>16</sup> See Margaret Sundell's interpretation of this photograph in relation to Roger Caillois' essay 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' (trans. John Shepley, published in *October* 31, (Winter 1984)) in her essay 'Vanishing Points: The Photography of Francesca Woodman', included in M. Catherine De Segher (ed.), *Inside the Visible- An Elliptical Traverse of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art – In, Of, and From the Feminine* (Flanders: The Kanaal Art Foundation & Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1996), p. 438.

rupture, described exquisitely on the print's own seductively smooth and glossy surface. Woodman's careful description of these surfaces endows her finished prints with a haptic sensuality, inviting a sense of touch that reflects the tactility of their hand-crafted production. Close friend and collaborator Sloan Rankin, a frequent model for Woodman's figurative photographs, remembers the feeling of her own skin as the photographer immersed her in flour and other powdery substances, or covered her body with sticky slivers of cold moist jelly in order to get just the right outline, just the right effect. Recognising the importance of this tactility, Rankin states that "one needs to feel the texture of the surfaces and objects in the pictures against bare skin" to truly understand what Woodman hoped to achieve in her work.<sup>17</sup>

To stage *Space Squared*, Woodman would have felt the texture of her props against her body, as she held up two large fragments of patterned wallpaper to cover herself. One piece hides her the lower half of her body, and the other arm raised above her head holds the other piece like a veil over her face. Her naked abdomen is still visible, as are her ankles and feet, the bared skin perhaps chilled in the unheated space. Already hiding her face under the paper, Woodman then 'decapitates' herself through the act of framing, as the photograph's top edge clips the top of her head. Feeling the wallpaper's underside rubbing on her body, the dried out paste perhaps rough against her bared skin, Woodman's tactile experience is re-played in her staged conjunction of analogous skin-surfaces. A sense of bodily discomfort is provoked by the interplay of skin with the torn and peeling sheets of parched wallpaper against the backdrop of the wall's own pitted and crumbling surface, suggesting an irritating scratching or pulling away of the delicate layers of the body's skin.

Although this photograph is related to the loosely-linked body of photographs Woodman took in the ruined rooms of an old house, this is one the few images in this series in which Woodman stripped for the camera, and so the emphasis on skin here seems quite explicit. The raised grain of the wooden boards marks the floor with the indexical whorls and grooves of a fingerprint, rough and parched. Shards of paint flake away from the skirting boards, blistering like sunburnt skin, shrivelling up and peeling away, whilst cracks and pits in the rough plaster appear like blemishes and wrinkles on the skin of the wall.

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<sup>17</sup> See Sloan Rankin's 'Peach Mumble – Ideas Cooking', in Hervé Chandès (ed.), *Francesca Woodman*



Carefully exposed, every detail is inscribed into the photograph's own surface, recalling an extensive series of photographs made by Aaron Siskind, in which the texture of the pictured surface is everything. A professor of photography at RISD with whom Woodman had contact during her period of study in the mid-1970s, Siskind also produced many photographs in which the emphasis was placed on broken surfaces, peeling paper and old flaking paint, his final prints an "elegant calligraphy of decay".<sup>18</sup> Woodman, a young female student of photography, and Siskind, grand 'master' of a straight modernist photographic style, seem somehow linked by this surface obsession, sharing a concern which places their photographs in dialogue. Both photographers used their local surroundings, seeking out surfaces ravaged by the effects of time, and surfaces bearing the marks of neglect and decay. Like Woodman, Siskind scoured Providence to find interesting subject matter: in a typical example from 1976 (fig. 2.7), simply entitled *Providence*, Siskind eliminated deep space to frame a tiny section of a plywood wall or board by moving extremely close to its surface. Its wooden grain and painted surface has contracted and crackled, whilst fragmented graffiti marks intrude from the edge of the frame and a diffuse splatter of spray-paint speckles the white surface. Depicting an abstracted photographic surface reminiscent of the flatness of the modernist paintings of the Abstract Expressionists with whom he was associated, Siskind's photograph relies on found texture for its visual interest.

Whilst Siskind strived to achieve pure abstraction, in which he aimed to rely on the "flat plane of the picture surface as the primary frame of reference" in a way that recalls the desired self-referentiality of Modernist painting, the photograph cannot help but refer outside of its own frame, as it always retains some indexical link to the material world. Whilst Siskind's *Homage to Franz Kline (Jalapa 45)* from 1973 (fig. 2.8) makes explicit reference to Kline's gestural paintings, the rough black brushstrokes of unintelligible graffiti are not abstract, and cannot help but invoke the original gesture of a subject outside of the frame. In other works, papery scraps retain other traces of language: in *New York 63* from 1976 (fig. 2.9), amongst the ragged edges the words 'city', 'churches' and 'imprisonment' are just discernible, signifying masculine space, patriarchal institutions and structures of containment. Siskind's tightly framed spaces

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(Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain & Zurich-Berlin-New York: Scalo, 1998), p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Turner, *Aaron Siskind: Photographs 1932-1978* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art & London: A. Zwemmer Ltd., 1979) (unpaginated).



and shallow depicted surfaces disrupt and fragment meaning, but they also insist on some element of a symbolic system of description. The loops of graffiti bear witness to both a performative gesture and the act of writing, and the inclusion of language also cannot help but enunciate a linguistic position, invoking the presence of a subject outside of the impossibly abstract field Siskind hoped his photograph would depict.

Unlike Siskind, Woodman usually chose interior sites for her photographs. Rather than scouring the streets of Providence for just the right section of urban wall, for *Space Squared* Woodman found an abandoned home, and broke in to stage her photograph in its desecrated interior rooms. These walls are not scrawled with graffiti or outdated advertising posters, but are in places still decorated with a lily-patterned wallpaper, left-over traces of the space's once-inhabited past. In this shot, large pieces remain intact, whilst some have lifted away from the surface of the wall, enabling the artist to cover her own skin with its floral abundance. Although Woodman sometimes used organic weed and bark peelings in conjunction with her own skin to re-enact a mythical conflation of woman with nature, here the lily print's exaggerated and overblown pattern seems to symbolise nature tamed by culture.<sup>19</sup> Reduced to a merely decorative and endlessly reproducible pattern, the image of the lily seems here appropriated to evoke an excessive femininity, one produced in culture, but still identified with nature. Overlaying her skin with this fussy, decorative surface, Woodman conceals herself beneath this feminised skin, whilst also drawing attention to her presence as glimpses of her body are revealed in the gaps between the papery veils.

Unlike Siskind's textural photographs, in which his technique seems somehow to re-seal, or smooth over the flaking and parched imaged surfaces so as to maintain the integrity of the print, Woodman's imagery is more unsettling. Each of Siskind's photographs is carefully exposed and focused, evenly lit, and printed up in a full tonal range, from the deepest black to bright white, with a scale of grey in between. In contrast, Woodman's scabrous surfaces in places suggest a literal tearing or scraping away of the photographic surface. Long exposure times necessary in the gloom of the house mean that the natural light filtering through the window has over-exposed these areas, bleaching out periphery detail and the photograph's framing edges, whilst the

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<sup>19</sup> See Abigail Solomon-Godeau's discussion of the MacDowell Colony series of images in her essay 'Just Like a Woman', included in *Photography at the Dock – Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 250.



wallpaper Woodman holds over her body is slightly blurred, resulting in a hazy lack of focus which seems to disrupt the crisp precision of the otherwise finely detailed surroundings. Woodman technically manipulates her photograph to suggest a breaking down of its own surface, in a kind of ‘attack’ that is made more explicit in a related shot from the same period (fig. 2.10). In this untitled image, in which only Woodman’s legs are included, strips of paper on the wall behind have been peeled away, revealing layer upon layer of variously patterned surfaces, excavating a temporal recession into the past. One scrap of paper is balanced against her legs. Bleached bright white, it appears flat and over-exposed, almost like a physical gash in the photograph’s own surface. Stark against the soft tones of the bare leg revealed by her hitched up skirt, this ‘rent’ in the surface rhymes with another paper curl on the floor. Darker grey, but with a white ragged edge that picks up the light, it appears as if this scrap is the piece ‘ripped’ from the surface, the resulting hole figuring a negative space, revealing an imaginary interiority to the photograph itself.

By placing her own bare skin under these ragged paper-skins, Woodman figures an uneasy interplay of torn paper and pliant body skin, hinting at a threatened attacking of her own skin. Bleached, burnt, reduced, cropped and cut — the photographic terms which describe Woodman’s technical ‘attack’ also suggest a similar imaginary violence on the skin of the body. In *Space Squared*, the muted tones of her skin contrast with the precise detailing of the cracked and decaying plaster crumbling from the walls, and the chipped and flaking paint of the skirting board. In some areas, the floral wallpaper remains intact, still smoothly pasted to the wall, whilst other scraps peel away, littering the bare floorboards. Woodman’s artful overlaying of the paper scraps on her own skin cannot help but suggest rupture, as the ripped edges of the paper seem to hint at a scraping away of her own bodily membranes, the breaking down of her own fragile bodily borders.

In Woodman’s photography, Margaret Sundell interprets the artist’s figuration of such “fragile membranes” in a Lacanian framework, as expressive of the process through which the artist’s subjectivity undergoes an ongoing process of formation and teetering collapse through the repetitive project of self-representation she pursues. Always on the point of regression, the skin-like surfaces Woodman figures are interpreted as being symbolic of the psychic borders and structures through which identity becomes discrete

and subjectivity realised. Each photographic self-reflection momentarily ensures the continued (mis)recognition of the subject's own bodily borders, acting as mirror-like surfaces preventing the subject's re-absorption into her surroundings.<sup>20</sup> The fragile outlines of Woodman's imaged body are interpreted as symbolic of psychic borders felt to be under duress, ephemeral, or only fleetingly experienced as fortifying and fully containing.

But it is important to recognise that Woodman's photographs do not *record* an unstable subjective spatial hold on her environment, nor are they expressive of a loosening of her own borders. Just as Plath's poems are not simple diary entries but carefully crafted creations, so Woodman's photographs are highly staged, immaculately planned and performed self-representations. There are no random elements in her photographs: Woodman's working practice usually included the making of detailed sketches as visual plans for her images, and her choice of props and background interest was always consciously thought through. In *Space Squared*, it is interesting to consider how the photographer might have set the scene. Having found the abandoned house, did Woodman seek out a patch of wall with just the right amount of paper intact, and just the right size piece peeling away, or did she actively strip it away from the plaster? Did she, even, paste up bits of paper she had carefully chosen and brought to the house with her? Were the floorboards already strewn with debris or did she artfully scatter the floorboards with bits of paper and lumps of crumbling plaster? Having set the stage, Woodman removed her clothes. Did she strip off, jump into place and click the shutter, or did Rankin come along for moral support and trip the shutter for her? Woodman had time to set up her tripod, time to frame the shot and find the correct place between the windows, time to remove her clothes and nudge them out of shot. But does the slight blur in the image point to the hurried taking up of Woodman's position, fearful of discovery in the creepy spaces of the ruined house?

These questions will remain unanswered. But by considering them, the theatrical elements of Woodman's photography are revealed, as are the careful decisions she made in the planning of the shot. Highly staged, none of Woodman's photographs attempt to record fleeting impressions of reality, but bear witness to a self-conscious staging of the self. Using herself as her frequent subject, or photographing others to

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<sup>20</sup> Sundell, 'Vanishing Points', p.437-438.



look like herself, Woodman's self-representations are immersed within a tradition of self-portraiture, a type of staging that, as Peggy Phelan points out, is fundamentally theatrical and always performative.<sup>21</sup> Unsure of what we really look like to another, we perform an image of the self, by, as Phelan puts it, "imitating what we think we look like".<sup>22</sup> As both agent behind the camera and the object of its gaze, Woodman performs *a self for her self*, casting off one image within a repertoire of selves, like a shed skin, a surface impression recorded by light falling on the negative.

But, like so many of her apparently self-representational photographs, *Space Squared* is no simple self-portrait. Having made the decision to strip down to the skin, Woodman then chose to cover herself over again, holding the great swathes of paper to hide her face and those parts of her body which mark her as female. The self that she performs here is unknowable and obscure, her paper props utilised to deny access to the subject on display. Rather than a project through which she endlessly displayed her own personality, a subjectivity that Budney has described as "expressively narcissistic", Woodman hides herself.<sup>23</sup> In an ambiguous gesture of concealment and revelation, Woodman instead here constructs her self-image within another tradition of art historical representation that positions her in the generalised role of Woman. Covering her pubic area with the paper held in her left hand, and her breast with the other, Woodman strikes a pose that recurs within the history of Western art as *the* pose through which the female body and feminine sexuality is represented — that of the *venus pudica*.

Originating in Praxiteles' *Knidian Aphrodite* from 350 BCE, and developed in later examples of classical statuary such as the *Capitoline Venus* from c. 120 BCE (fig. 2.11), the pose described a narrative moment in which the goddess Aphrodite was caught in the act of bathing. Hearing someone approaching, in modesty and apprehension she covered herself with drapery, hiding her exposed body whilst also unavoidably drawing attention to her state of undress. Positioning the spectator of the sculpture in the place

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<sup>21</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked – The Politics of Performance* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> Budney, p.13. Budney likens Woodman to Sylvia Plath in this way, as she describes both women's work as produced from narcissism. But when Woodman was asked by Sloan Rankin why she so often posed naked as the subject of her photographs, she replied: "It's a matter of convenience, I'm always available." (see Rankin, 'Peach Mumble – Ideas Cooking', p. 35). But in the many images in which the

of the potentially voyeuristic intruder, the ambiguity of the gesture constructs a feminine sexuality at once shameful and exhibitionist, fixing the female subject here within a sexualised economy of looking. As Nanette Salomon has pointed out, the pose is now so ubiquitous in art history that it goes almost unnoticed, having undergone a process of normalisation which renders its codified system of representation all but invisible.<sup>24</sup> Establishing a fetishised code of representing the female body, in which, as Salomon points out, feminine 'lack' must be covered over in order to allay masculine castration anxiety, the gesture inevitably draws the gaze to the point of absence, in so doing reducing the figure of woman to her body and her sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

In this shot, Woodman uses the floral wallpaper as a substitute for classical drapery, carefully folding over the top edge of the piece covering her pubis, and shifting it during exposure to produce a slight ripple of motion which echoes the folds of soft fabric. Woodman was certainly inspired by classical art throughout her career, having spent childhood holidays in her family's Tuscan home, and a year pursuing RISD's European exchange programme in Rome between May 1977 and August 1978. The influence of Italy's rich history and classical past is most evident in Woodman's series of draped angels and the caryatid forms which she used in her series of monumental blueprints made in New York in 1980.

But as well as providing an early example of the classical theme which recurs in her later work, the adoption of this pose here forges connections with contemporaneous art practice of the 1970s, particularly with some of the work produced by female artists who were at the time using their own bodies in representation. In the literature written in the years since Woodman's photographs were first publicised, this contextual framework has been all but erased. Although Abigail Solomon-Godeau has suggested that Woodman's iconography seems to have a kind of 'proto-feminist' intent, she also describes the photographer as a rare female photographic "prodigy", her work

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artist's face is veiled and her body partially covered, it is impossible to tell if it is actually Woodman herself, or one of the female friends and models often included in her work.

<sup>24</sup> See Nanette Salomon's 'The Venus Pudica: Uncovering Art History's 'Hidden Agenda' and Pernicious Pedigrees' in Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996). For a recent discussion of the way in which the Venus is represented at various moments in art history, see Caroline Arscott and Katie Scott (eds), *Manifestations of Venus, Art and Sexuality* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Salomon, 'The Venus Pudica', p. 71.



subsequently difficult to place.<sup>26</sup> Jen Budney echoes this imagined creative isolation, commenting that although Woodman was working at a time when artists such as Hannah Wilke and Eleanor Antin were using their own bodies as sites of artistic production in performance-related photography, Woodman's diary-like photographs "explore something intensely personal rather than symbolic".<sup>27</sup> Whilst Woodman was not motivated by the political concerns of the emerging feminist movement, her work is also deeply immersed within the climate of body and performance-related art practice of the period. In this work, by striking a pose so firmly entrenched within an art historical tradition of the nude, an intentional questioning of such codes of representation seems apparent.

The same *pudica* pose was used by Hannah Wilke in her performance-related work series entitled *S. O. S. Starification Object Series* made between 1972 and 1982 (fig. 2.12), in which the artist produced a number of photographs of herself in a series of pin-up or 'cheesecake' poses. Looking out at the viewer in these shots, Wilke is unsmiling, provocative even, soliciting the spectatorial gaze. All of the images mimic poses from contemporary advertising and soft-core pornographic imagery, and some of them, as Wilke makes clear, are based on the tradition of the classical *pudica*. In one detail, Wilke's hand and fingers are splayed out over the fly of her jeans, whilst in another she covers her breasts with her hand and forearm and hooks her thumb into a belt loop (fig. 2.13). In contemporary blue jeans, Wilke's 1970s *venus pudica* is updated, revealing the extent to which the pose still connoted a narrative of sexual availability posed to titillate a potential voyeur.

Wilke's project is one example of body-related practice by a woman artist informed by feminism that has subsequently been interpreted as naïve, criticised for apparently unknowingly colluding with those systems of representation through which the female body and sexuality has been abused.<sup>28</sup> Whilst any female artist using her own body has

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<sup>26</sup> Solomon-Godeau, 'Just Like a Woman', p. 240.

<sup>27</sup> Budney, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> As Mary Kelly states, "[m]ost women artists who have presented themselves in some way, visibly, in their work have been unable to find the kind of distancing devices which would cut across the predominant representations of women as object of the look, or that would question the notion of femininity as a pregiven entity". See 'No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith' originally published in *Parachute*, no. 26 (1982), reprinted in Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1996), p. 67. Wilke's use of her own naked form was criticised by Lucy Lippard in 1976 for displaying a "confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist, flirt and feminist" in 'The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth – European and American Women's Body Art,' first



been seen to have collapsed the critical distance necessary to question the operations of the male gaze, this is deemed particularly and apparently unavoidably true of any woman who fits within the narrow strictures of a contemporary ideal of beauty. As Lisa Tickner stated in 1978, "the more attractive the woman, the higher the risk [of exploitation], since the more closely they approach conventional stereotypes in the first place," exposing a vulnerability that Abigail Solomon-Godeau recognises Woodman's self-representational photography might itself invite.<sup>29</sup> Although maintaining that the photographer's imagery disrupts the operations of fetishism in the fixing of the female body as image, Solomon-Godeau does note that her imagery might also be "vulnerable to the charge of collusion with those very operations".<sup>30</sup> Like Wilke, Woodman could be accused of such intellectual naivety, and her own physical charms have certainly not gone unnoticed, one male reviewer describing the photographer as having fortunately been "blessed with a classical female form of her own".<sup>31</sup>

But Woodman's careful adoption of this highly codified pose should be interpreted not only as evidence of the artist's awareness of the art world context in which she was working, but a conscious strategy of critique. Through using her own body to mimic both the codes of art historical tradition and of contemporary representation, Woodman undoes their fixed nature. Like Wilke's, this is no ageless goddess: with her dirty, clumsy-looking feet and grimy toenails, Woodman's Venus is very obviously of this world, situated within an historically specific and geographically placed domestic interior. Having chosen this space of ruined domesticity, Woodman used an overblown floral wallpaper to cover herself, the domestic paper becoming the mundane, quotidian substitute for elegant classical linen. With its floral excess, the patterned paper seems to exaggerate the carefully contrived femininity of the pose's codes, and as such is perhaps itself indicative of a strategic display of what Amelia Jones calls a "hyperfemininity".<sup>32</sup>

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published in *Art in America*, 64, no. 3 (May-June 1976) (reprinted in *From the Center – Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), p. 126. Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis echoed this view when they asked: "is her art work enticing critique or titillating enticement? It seems her work ends up by reinforcing what it intends to subvert"; see Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, 'Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art Making', first published in *LIP: Feminist Arts Journal* (1981-1982), and reprinted in Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer & Joanna Frueh (eds) *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> See Lisa Tickner, 'The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists since 1970' in *Art History*, volume 1, no. 2 (June 1978), p. 2. In this essay, Tickner presents an overview of the thematic and iconographic strands being explored by women artists during the 1970s.

<sup>30</sup> Solomon-Godeau, 'Just Like a Woman', p. 244.

<sup>31</sup> Andy Grundberg, exhibition review, *New York Times Guide*, 2/3/1986, p.2.

<sup>32</sup> See Amelia Jones' discussion of Hannah Wilke's performative photographs in *Body Art – Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, MN & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).



Using the term to describe Wilke's performative mimicry of the pin-up pose, and drawing on Craig Owens' idea of the 'rhetoric of the pose', Jones reclaims Wilke's feminist intentions. For her, Wilke's actions were not unknowingly collusive with the operations of a desiring and fetishising male gaze, but instead working to upset the rigidity of these codes of representation from within, as the gesture of striking a pose pre-empts the camera's freeze-frame action of fixing the body as image. As Owens states, the pose is an "animation performed only to be suspended", and as such is crucial to the construction of the stereotype. In the act of strategically mimicking such a pose, the female artist predicts and pre-empts this moment of stoppage, in so doing defusing the processes of objectification through which the female body and sexuality is codified, becoming pinned down and fixed through repeated acts of representation.<sup>33</sup>

Woodman's adoption of this pose might work in this way, her use of the feminised paper coverings a more obvious defence against a penetrating gaze, as visual access is literally stopped by the opaque materiality of her drapery. Pulling it over her body to hide both the specificity of her identity and her own sexuality, Woodman displaces the femininity assumed to be inherent to the imaged subject onto both the domestic wallpaper and onto the codified pose itself. Just as the *pudica* pose clothes all of its art historical subjects with the veneer of a debased and shameful feminine sexuality and fixes them within a system of lack and fetishised looking, so Woodman appropriates the pose to clothe her own image with art historical tradition. Using her drapery to construct herself within a resonant tradition of the nude which it simultaneously denies, Woodman's clothes herself in a pose through which her own sexuality and identity is paradoxically obscured. The pose, then, and the material means through which it is achieved here, becomes a kind of protective gesture, concealing the artist's body from her own camera, but in a way which makes explicit the 'hyperfemininity' of its historical associations. As if retreating into an art historical shell, Woodman appropriates the stereotype as a means of protection, a defensive carapace behind which the subject herself disappears.

In *Space Squared*, the glimpses of the bare skin Woodman includes cannot help but draw attention to the body's concealment, the soft tones of her flesh contrasting with the

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<sup>33</sup> See Craig Owens, 'The Medusa Effect, or, the Specular Ruse' in Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, Jane Weinstock and Simon Watney (eds), *Beyond Recognition – Representation, Power and Culture* (Berkeley, CA & Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), p.192.

paper's sharp and jagged torn edges, the scraps on the floor, and the pitted scarring of the paintwork. Like Wilke's act of glueing small curls of chewing gum onto her skin in order to disrupt the smooth beauty of her bared form in *S. O. S. Starification Object Series*, Woodman's juxtaposition of smooth skin and scarred architectural detail alludes to a kind of attack on the body's surface, an undoing of the smooth skin on which female beauty is assumed to lodged. Explicit in Wilke's work, this act of 'uglification' is carried out through her use of gum 'scarifications.' Covering her skin with chewed malleable wounds which are echoed in the 'starification' of the work's title, Wilke makes reference to her perceived status as an art world star, whilst also invoking a tradition of non-Western beauty and bodily mutilative practices at odds with her pin-up celebrity. The words of critic Max Kozloff reflect this status: writing in 1975, he derided female artists such as Wilke for conforming to the ideal of the "glamorous sex object with the glorified epidermis".<sup>34</sup> Sexuality and the sheen of glamour are seen to reside in the surface of the body, traced across the skin, a surface that for Wilke became the logical site of disruption and resistance. By performing an act of symbolic defacement on her own body's surface, Wilke drew attention to the way in which her beauty and femininity became a burden, an obstacle in the path of her work's serious critical reception.

The role of the skin as the bearer of outward appearances was at the time being addressed by a number of other women artists, particularly in performance-related works in which themes of beauty, identity and self-creation were explored with the aid of cosmetics, costume and beautifying rituals. As Lucy Lippard noted in 1975, women artists informed by feminism were using these traditionally feminine tools to construct an alternative identity, a "self that was not outwardly apparent, a self that challenged or exposed the roles they had been playing".<sup>35</sup> By applying and removing cosmetics, performances such as Eleanor Antin's *Representational Painting* of 1971, and 'Leah's Room' at the Cal Arts Feminist Art Program's *Womanhouse* project of 1972 addressed

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<sup>34</sup> Max Kozloff, 'Pygmalion Reversed', *Artforum*, vol. 14 (November 1975), p. 36. Ann Sargent Wooster, writing one month later, extends this criticism in a review of Wilke's work which stated: "Hannah Wilke unfortunately felt she had to get on the bandwagon of artists' 'nudie' pin-ups with a vulgarly accessorised (i.e. unzipped blue jeans, hair curlers, etc.) rendering of her semi-nude flesh in 28 photos." Whilst Wooster's derision of blue jeans and curlers suggests class-based snobbery, her reading of Wilke's pose is unquestioning, and she goes on to criticise Wilke not only for being beautiful but for daring to disrupt this beauty, as she describes the work as a record of "the ways she 'crudded up' her 'perfect flesh' with her personal portable leprosy." See her review in *Artforum*, vol. 14 (December 1975), p. 74.



issues of identity and criticised the ways in which feminine subjectivity is culturally acquired, worn like a façade on the skin.

Whilst some artists used make-up to cover over and re-create the naturally bare skin, other performances concentrated on the ways in which the skin of the body is also seen as a site of excess. Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* of 1972 (fig. 2.14), for example, recorded a 36-day weight loss diet as a series of 144 black and white photographs. Constructed in temporal sequence, these shots narrate a 10lb weight loss through the shrinkage of the artist's skin, a bodily contraction which is only just discernible across the tiny daily incremental changes. Alluding to a classical sculptural tradition in which the material substrate is carved to reveal the inherent ideal form embedded within, Antin's project exposes the ways in which the ideal of femininity is always a product of art, always produced in culture. Whilst barely visible, the gradually shrinking skin becomes the visual marker of this process of cultural control, its actual reduction as much a code of culturally acquired femininity as the classical pose adopted by both Woodman and Wilke.<sup>36</sup>

The psychic implications of such practices became the focus of a performance by English artist Sue Madden, whose *Chrysalis* from 1974 used the skin as the site for the acting out of what Rozsika Parker called feminine "removing rituals", the reductive processes through which a perfected, feminised body-surface is endlessly pursued.<sup>37</sup> A photograph published in *Studio International* in 1976 shows the artist preparing for her

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<sup>35</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Making Up: Role Playing and Transformation in Women's Art', first published in *Ms.*, no. 4 (October 1975), reprinted in *From the Center*, p. 103.

<sup>36</sup> It is interesting that Antin's project was not criticised in the same way as the formally similar imagery made by Wilke. One male critic described the art work's performed weight loss as a "laudable endeavour" which although artistically irrelevant (he described Antin as playing the role of jester), was "a whopping success: she lost five pounds." (David Bourbon, review in *Art International*, vol. 17, no. 4 (April 1973). Apart from the error (she actually lost ten pounds), Bourbon fails to question why Antin might starve herself in the name of art; so inscribed within feminine identity, the process is unable to be read as an artistic project, perhaps due to the ways in which Antin herself deviated from an ideal of tall, slender femininity. Lisa Bloom suggests that there might be an ethnic subtext to such a reading: Bloom describes the way in which *Carving* challenges "the unacknowledged racial and ethical assumptions underlying Kenneth Clark's *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*" which Antin herself was drawing upon in the representation her own body—"an attractive, short Jewish woman"—in relation to an 'ideal'. Although both Antin and Wilke used their own bodies to parody representational systems, Antin's project is (arguably) clearer in its critique. Refusing to strike stereotypically alluring poses, Antin's unidealised pose in the series imitates the mug-shots of a police line-up, satirising the "pseudo-science" of conceptual art photography's claim to "clinical objectivity", and those codes of representation with which Wilke was seen to be complicit. See Lisa Bloom, 'Rewriting the Script: Eleanor Antin's Feminist Art' in Howard N. Fox (ed.), *Eleanor Antin* (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999), p. 168.

performance, which formed part of a collaborative project in which a group of women artists took over an abandoned house in South London (fig. 2.15). Rather than using her skin as a blank canvas to be covered over with a cosmetic mask, Madden planned to lay it bare, as she was to pluck her eyebrows, shave her arms and legs, and scrub her skin with harsh astringent lotions.

But in the event, Madden was unable to use her own skin: not only did she decide that the inevitable pain of these actions would be “sacrificial and masochistic”, Madden also recognised the ways in which her own identity and subjectivity became fragmented, deformed through processes of so-called beautification.<sup>38</sup> Wanting to experience her body and self as an “integrated whole” once more, Madden instead used a cloth ‘second skin’ as the material for her act. Covering her body, and pierced with thick woolly ‘hairs’ and crude embroidered blemishes, this second fabric skin replicated her own first skin, down even to “embroidered moles, hairs and appendix scar”.<sup>39</sup>

As the photograph shows, this is no smooth ideal of a fetishised skin. With its crisp creases and sharp seams, Madden’s fabricated armour stands just apart from the real skin of the body, stiff and angular against the softness of the naked skin glimpsed beneath the gaps and slits in its surface. A similar discrepancy might be discerned in Woodman’s *Space Squared*, in the interplay of feminised paper skin and organic bodily skin. Another related photograph from 1976, which bears the hand-written inscription *Then at one point I did not need to translate the notes: they went directly to my hands*, exaggerates this notion of disembodied skin. In the image, Woodman has pictured herself on her knees, crouched beneath a large paper shell (fig. 2.16). Created from the shed wallpaper, the shell follows the curve of her spine, almost entirely covering her body. As if pushed out from the fleshy depths of her body to form a carapace, the paper appears like an exo-skeletal structure from which only the glimpse of her hip protrudes at one side. Her hands, splayed out against the wall above her head, appear like claws or tentacles, exaggerating the crustacean-like form of the shell.

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<sup>37</sup> See Roszika Parker, ‘Housework’, *Spare Rib*, no. 26 (1975), p. 38, reprinted in Roszika Parker & Griselda Pollock (eds), *Framing Feminism – Art and the Women’s Movement 1970- 1985* (London & New York: Pandora, 1987), p. 200.

<sup>38</sup> Sue Madden, quoted by Roszika Parker, ‘Housework’, p. 200; Madden’s performance was apparently inspired by a quotation from Robin Morgan which states that “each sister [is] wearing masks of Revlon, Clairol, Playtex, to survive.” See Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, in the introduction to *Framing Feminism*, p.16-17.

<sup>39</sup> Parker, ‘Housework’, p. 200.



Perhaps, like Madden, by covering her naked body with this fabricated wallpaper shell exoriated from the walls of the interior, Woodman comments on the problematic nature of a culturally acquired feminine appearance. Hiding in the shadow of a paper-shell, does Woodman probe the same gap between the feminised surface of appearance and the natural skin beneath? By opening up a gap between acquired skin and real body-skin beneath, Madden's performance hinted at the possibility of an alternative identity to the one she refused to re-enact upon her own skin; resisting the norms of feminine self-presentation, Madden suggested that under the smoothed feminine skin there lies an interior, more truthful original identity, which Lisa Tickner describes as "assumed to be separate from, and hidden by, external appearances".<sup>40</sup> Any hope of excavating the 'reality' of female identity behind this edifice smacks, perhaps, of essentialism.<sup>41</sup>

What is more interesting here is the way in which the experience and representation of body-skin is felt to be so intimately involved with the production of the artist's identity, the discomfort Madden experienced performing such mundane feminine rituals somehow having a similarly damaging effect on her experience of her body and her subjectivity. By choosing instead to perform these actions on the fabricated skin, not only are the effects dramatised and exaggerated, but displaced from the reality of the body. Just as Woodman's photographs and Plath's poetry might be interpreted as 'second skins', substitute surfaces of light and words upon which something about the experience of their own skin and its shadowy psychic counterparts might be played out,

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<sup>40</sup> Tickner, 'The Body Politic', p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> This charge, which has been retrospectively applied to some of the feminist art production of the early 1970s by feminist theorists and artists such as Mary Kelly, invests the work with a naïve idealism, a seemingly misguided belief in the possibility of the representation of the specificity of female desire, sexuality and experience. In attempting to reveal this essence, "the truth of woman", the "enigma of femininity is formulated as a problem of imagistic misrepresentation which is subsequently resolved by discovering a true identity behind the patriarchal façade." See Kelly, 'Desiring Images/Imaging Desire', originally published in *Wedge*, no. 6, (Winter 1994), reprinted in *Imaging Desire*, p. 123; see also 'Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism', which originally appeared in *Screen* 22, no. 23 (1981), also reprinted in *Imaging Desire*. Through her own art work and writing, Kelly takes a theoretical stance, using Lacanian and psychoanalytic theory as a means of questioning the structures through which femininity and female oppression are psychically inscribed. Criticising the writing of Ulrike Rosenbach and Lea Vergine, who in the 1970s were writing in support of the use of the female body in the 'Body Art' practices of the early 1970s, Kelly sees in the use of the body a problematic reference to a universal female essence, and also the susceptibility of the artist to use the body in the perpetuation of the traditional notions of female narcissism and masochism. This position is re-iterated by Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis in 'Textual Strategies'; Barry & Flitterman-Lewis agree that during the 1970s it was important for female artists to reclaim the right to representation and to give voice to personal experience, but also criticise

by piercing and plucking the crude cloth of her armoured dummy skin Madden created another surrogate, her skin's own disembodied double.

As if projected from the body, the cloth shell Madden fashioned also echoed the walls of the room in which her performance was staged. To prepare this upstairs bedroom, a space evocative of the feminised interior space of the private boudoir, Madden draped its walls with the same white cloth out of which she fashioned her second skin. Conjuring up the connotations of womb-like space that is made explicit by Madden's choice of the title *Chrysalis*, Rozsika Parker described the room as shaded and intimate, but also claustrophobic, at once soothing and protective and over-containing.<sup>42</sup> Inviting her audience into the room which she described as both a projection of herself, and a chrysalis-like space of gestation and transformation, Madden's site became a space of interaction, of mutable subjectivity and inter-subjective identifications, conjuring up a similarly ambiguous psychic space in which borders are transgressed, subject positions unstable, and subjectivity under threat.

Woodman's own photographs seem to describe such an uneasy state of subjectivity. The body hiding behind the wallpaper in *Space Squared* brings to mind the descent into madness suffered by the heroine of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's tale of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as the artist disappears beneath its papery surface.<sup>43</sup> Sinking beneath the decorative but defaced surface of the domestic space, Woodman's body and image becomes contained in a framed space whose claustrophobic containment is heightened by the suffocating light streaming through the space of the windows.

But just as she appears to conceal herself beneath these domestic skins, Woodman's actions could also be interpreted as if trying to get free, as if emerging from some prior state of containment. A related photograph, taken around the same time, but in her studio at RISD, shows the artist again half-concealed beneath a papery covering (fig. 2.17). This time pinned down to the wall on either side of her body, the central section of the sheet has been torn in a starburst pattern, as if the body beneath was beginning to burst through the fragile membrane. An inverted v-shape covers her pubic triangle,

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artists of the period for lacking an analytic approach, and for neglecting to consider both the social and unconscious forces at play.

<sup>42</sup> Parker, 'Housework', p. 200.

<sup>43</sup> This is discussed in relation to nineteenth century domesticity and the critical literature on Woodman's 'House' series in the first chapter of this thesis.



itself torn with a vaginal slit, making a reference to the female body which is exaggerated by the forms of the large conch shell Woodman holds against her body. The smooth, delicately exposed interior surface of the shell is held toward the camera, its surface and depth connoting both feminine sexuality and doubling the protective function of the womb-like paper shell from which she breaks free.

An ambiguous state of hiding and revelation is suggested, and this is further played out in the image bearing the words *Then at one point I did not need to translate the notes: they went directly to my hands*. This inscription, which comes from a poem Woodman wrote whilst at RISD, suggests the way in which her body became her medium.<sup>44</sup> As her mind or memory is bypassed in the act of playing the piano, the body becomes a kind of channel, what Rosalind Krauss describes as a conduit, or a “plane of passage”.<sup>45</sup> Using herself as her medium of expression, Woodman presses her fingers against the surface of the wall, aping the position of the hands playing a piano’s keys. But as the shadows falling from her splayed fingers double and exaggerate their forms, they appear more aggressively animalistic and claw-like, and the surface of the wall against which she rests them is covered in places with a number of scratchy vertical striations. All over the already mouldering plaster, these grubby dark smudges appear almost like the traces of fingernails clawing away at the wall, as if made by a subject trying desperately to get out. As the carefully crafted paper carapace balanced against Woodman’s back provides a shell-like covering into which she retreats, withdrawing her image from view, there is also a sense in which the artist appears to be crawling out of her chrysalis, emerging as a newly forming subject.

The papery carapace Woodman has stripped from the walls of this space has a dual function, protecting the subject as she pulls it over her body in a process of self-covering, whilst also giving the impression of being the claustrophobic, suffocating containing shell from which the subject tries frantically to free herself. Both soothingly protective and stifling and over-containing, this shell seems to symbolise those functions of both the skin of the body and its phantasy equivalent imagined to house the contents of the psyche. Staged within this desecrated, uncomfortable domestic interior, and forged from the very skin which once covered and decorated the walls of its

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<sup>44</sup> The inscription is taken from a poem Woodman wrote for her friend Sloan Rankin, who was taking a poetry class at RISD.

<sup>45</sup> Rosalind Krauss, ‘Problem Sets’, in *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1999), p. 173.

architectural shell, Woodman's paper shell also evokes the maternal body as a space in and from which the individuated subject emerges.

The interrelation of skin, subject and the womb-like connotations of the shell Woodman stages here brings to mind the terms of Anzieu's theory of the psychic skin, the skin-like ego crafted from the child's relationship to the mother's body. In Anzieu's theorisation, for the newly forming subject to successfully create both an individuated psychic boundary and a bodily-schema, something must be internalised as a primary psychic container, a 'sac' which forms the background fabric for all subsequent processes of introjection and projection. Forged from the mother's own skin through the tactile experience of skin-on-skin contact, this psychic skin is produced from the enveloping environment of maternal handling, breast-feeding and soothing caresses.

More often than not distorted through either over-handling or tactile neglect, the irruption of the 'skin ego' in later life bears witness to the structure's failure, as it dissolves, or melts, or becomes filled with sieve-like holes through which any grasp of subjectivity seems to leak away. To read Woodman's visual description of so many skin surfaces within these terms could only ever be symptomatic of a disturbed subject, a subject whose psychic envelope can only be read as devastatingly flawed. The torn scraps of wallpaper in *Space Squared* and *Then at one point...* evoke a painful peeling away of skin, the rupturing of delicate fleshy membranes and the soreness of red-raw ragged edges, whilst the pitted and cracked plaster of the walls, and the blistering paint of the skirting boards is so carefully exposed, so precisely detailed that it cannot help but evoke a disrupted skin surface. Excoriated from the womb-like walls of the house, Woodman's paper-skin coverings are ripped apart, mutilated, irrecoverably damaged, and within the strictures of Anzieu's theory, could only express the artist's own pathological malaise, as if indicative of a fissured, fragmented skin-ego incapable of containing and protecting her hold on subjectivity. To read Woodman's photographs as visual irruptions of her own weak, flawed and painfully damaged skin-ego would be to re-confirm the ways in which they have been interpreted as literal expressions of the artist's own mental distress.

Woodman, through her photographic manipulations of found surfaces, lays emphasis on ragged edges and fuzzy borders, describing the skin not as ideally homogenous, but



instead as a site of rupture and fragmentation. This seems to be at odds with the ideally smooth skin-surface from which the containing function of Anzieu's notion of the skin ego is formed. A smooth, unbroken surface capable of housing a phantasy of containment, the ideal skin ego is a unified, coherent and uninterrupted surface which envelops the subject, whose perfection lies in individuation. Woodman, in another untitled photograph (fig. 2.18), taken just after or just before *Then at one point...*, conversely draws attention to a moment of uncontainment, as in this shot her paper-skin is almost totally blurred. A relative sharp focus on the paper's ripped edges has created the impression of the ridges of vertebrae, a spiny backbone pushed out of the depths of the body to be registered as a brittle skeletal structure just covered over by a thin and translucent membrane of skin. Light has blurred the edges, the surface of the shell becoming hazy, bleached into almost complete indistinction, as if melting into the skin of Woodman's body. Suspended in the relatively long period of exposure, the motion of the paper-shell records an eternally shifting moment, evoking a subject captured forever in an ambiguous state of flux.

Perhaps Anzieu's theory is unable to account for the uneasy subjectivity evoked in this series: perhaps it cannot be upheld here precisely because it constructs as normative the ideal of a coherent, containing ego, and as such is emblematic of a trajectory of post-Freudian psycho-analytic theory criticised by Jacqueline Rose for ignoring the problematic nature of the processes through which gendered subjectivity might be acquired.<sup>46</sup> For Rose, the value of a Freudian theory of subjectivity lies in its emphasis on the basic premise of constant failure, the presumption that the internalisation of a 'normal' gendered subjectivity can never truly work.<sup>47</sup> Never easily achieved, and never smoothly maintained, subjectivity is produced through failure, moments of undoing which are relived and repeated throughout life.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Rose criticises strands of psychoanalytic thought that challenged Freud's stress on the impossibility of the path to normality of the girl child, and introduced the development of a coherent ego. See Jacqueline Rose, 'Femininity and its Discontents', first published in *Feminist Review* 14 (Summer 1983), and reprinted in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 91. Rose's text was published in response to Elizabeth Wilson's criticism of a feminist use of psychoanalytic theory in 'Psychoanalysis: Psychic Law and Order', *Feminist Review* 8 (Summer 1981). Rose states that in the 1920s and 1930s, psychoanalysts challenged Freud's stress on the divisions and splitting of the psychic subject, and "introduced the more normative stress on a sequence of development, and coherent ego, back into the account" (p. 91). Rose outlines the way in which Lacanian psychoanalysis strove to return to the idea of division and "an endless (he called it 'insistent' pressure of the unconscious against any individual's pretension to a smooth and coherent psychic and sexual identity" (p. 91).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



Anzieu gives no attention to problems of gender or the specificity of sexual difference, his theory assuming the possibility of a universal and undifferentiated subjectivity. And whilst this disregard for the gender problems recognised in the Freudian theory from which his own work springs might mean Anzieu's account is unsupportable for any feminist investigation into constructions of subjectivity, what is more striking is the way in which the feminine subject on which his project depends is repressed. Whilst describing the ways in which the role of the mother is essential in the construction of the newly forming subject, Anzieu's text is throughout haunted by this absent figure. The only gendered subject included, this subject is then defined by her reproductive function, and objectified, becoming merely that skin-surface to be internalised by the emerging subject. Reduced to an enveloping surface to be appropriated and made use of as an object, the maternal figure is denied her own subjectivity, and denied the inter-subjective relationship of reciprocity experienced in the union of the maternal dyad.

It is this objectification of the maternal subject which formed the heart of Luce Irigaray's feminist critique of psychoanalysis, which during the 1970s exposed the construction of subjectivity through which the 'feminine' is always alienated, always denied access to a true subject-position. Having no access to a maternal subjectivity, the emerging feminine subject has no access to identificatory processes, no access to self-representation, at the same time as being confined by the suffocating discomfort of taking the (always) masculine position of subjectivity. By assuming the masculine position within an economy of desire necessary for the attainment of subjectivity, the female subject is displaced from the specificity of her own 'envelope' of identity. And as Irigaray states, when criticising those theories of the 'psychic envelope' of which Anzieu's is exemplary, psychoanalytic thought must recognise the need for a new conception of "the different envelopes known as identity".<sup>49</sup> Uncomfortable in this limiting, proscriptive 'skin', and severed from an ongoing, reciprocal and identificatory relationship with the maternal body, the female subject is uprooted and abandoned,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'Sexual Difference' in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, (trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill) (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 7. In her editorial notes to another edition of this essay, Toril Moi notes that Irigaray's discussion here is concerned with the relationship between the container and the contained, but that her use of the terms *envelope* and *enveloppe* may allude to the theories of the 'psychic envelope' and the skin-ego developed by psychoanalysts such as Anzieu. See Moi's editorial notes to Luce Irigaray's 'Sexual Difference' (trans. Sean Hand), reprinted in Margaret Whitford (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991).



taking up her displaced position in the symbolic order which Irigaray describes as a state of “*déréliction*”.<sup>50</sup>

As Margaret Whitford points out, the original French meaning of this evocative term is far stronger than its English translation as ‘dereliction’, as it brings to mind a state of utter abandonment, a subject left “without hope, without help, without refuge.”<sup>51</sup> But as well as conjuring this sense of displacement, the state of dereliction is also paradoxically one of fusion, and describes the feminine subject’s failure to become successfully differentiated and separated from the original identification with the maternal body. As if dislodged from her own skin, her own shell-like carapace, the feminine subject is cast out, only to be left in an ambiguous and hazy state of self-displacement at odds with the comfortable category of *habiter*—or ‘dwelling’—that characterises masculine subjectivity.<sup>52</sup>

By picturing a distanced but ambiguous relationship to the feminised, maternal skin-shell in *Then at one point ...*, Woodman’s imagery seems to evoke this discomfort, this uneasy displacement. Contained within an artificial, assumed second skin, Woodman’s just-blurred action, more exaggerated in the related shot in fig. 2.18, seems to suggest the disquieting feeling of not being quite comfortable in one’s own skin. At once spiny and brittle, and soft and melting, this projected skin does not fit its subject well. Creating a sense of unease exaggerated by the old house’s own derelict state, Woodman’s depiction of these uncanny spaces left devoid of warmth and familial comfort, evokes the notion of the maternal body made strange.

The sense of alienation from her own envelope, her own skin, which Irigaray describes as the feminine position in psychoanalytic theory, could be exemplified by the way in which the feminine subject is suppressed in Anzieu’s own theorisation. Forged from the ideal surface of the maternal body, the skin ego provides the means through which the subject is individuated and defined. But that state of self-containment, in Anzieu’s theory, is achieved only through the objectification and loss of the originary maternal subject. Produced from the relationship to the maternal body, but also marking the

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<sup>50</sup> This term appears in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 126. The text was delivered as a public lecture on November 18, 1982, and was first published in French in 1984.

<sup>51</sup> See Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray – Philosophy in the Feminine* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 77-78.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.



subject's severance from it, the skin ego then comes to symbolise a moment of extrication. Just as the infant is physically severed from the maternal body through the cutting of the umbilical cord, so psychic individuation is predicated upon the fantasy of an enveloping surface that also paradoxically symbolises a kind of cut in that 'skin'. This cut, whilst signifying the drastic extrication of the maternal subject which echoes the 'matricide' which Irigaray uncovers in the foundations of androcentric Western philosophical discourse of which Anzieu's psychoanalytic theory is itself part, also invokes the terms of photographic representation itself.<sup>53</sup>

With the click of its shutter, the snapping action of the camera excises its subject from the world, cutting off a tiny moment in time, and preserving it on the fragile emulsion of the negative's own skin-like surface.<sup>54</sup> As Anzieu notes, the French term *pellicule* not only describes a fine organic membrane, but is also used to denote a delicate layer of a solid substance adhering to another surface, and because of this is used to describe photographic film.<sup>55</sup> On its gelatinous support, the negative bears a pellicule of light-sensitive silver-salt emulsion. Like the skin of the body and the phantasy of the skin ego, it is liable to rupture, fracture, dissolve or simply flake away, destroying the potential development of the positive print and the smooth gloss of the resultant image.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes the piercing force of the photograph's *punctum*, that lacerating detail which cuts through the mere detail of the image and penetrates to the heart of the spectatorial subject.<sup>56</sup> But Barthes also experiences the intimate connection offered by the photograph, its promise of reunion with the imaged subject described within a bodily language of skin and touch. The body invoked is that of the maternal body, as Barthes describes the photographic medium of light as a maternal skin, a fleshy, carnal medium through which the original object of the image and the subsequent spectatorial subject become reunited, intertwined in the moment of

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<sup>53</sup> See Luce Irigaray, 'Gesture in Psychoanalysis' published in *Sexes and Genealogies*, (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (New York & Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1987), p.11.

<sup>54</sup> See Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte Photographique et Autre Essais* (Brussels: Labor, 1990), for a discussion of the photographic 'cut'; this is discussed at length in relation to Woodman's imagery of pain and suggested 'self-cutting' in the third chapter of this thesis, a version of which was published as 'Delicate cutting: Francesca Woodman's articulation of the photographic *coupe*' in *Object, Graduate Research and Reviews in the History of Art and Visual Culture* (London: History of Art Department, UCL, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, p. 210.

<sup>56</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (trans. Richard Howard) (London: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 26. Barthes' text was originally published in 1982, just after his mother's death, and shortly before his own.



viewing.<sup>57</sup> Looking at any photograph, the image's original exposing light is re-constituted in the viewer's eyes, becoming "a sort of umbilical cord" linking the referent to the gaze. As Barthes puts it, it is "a skin I share with anyone who has ever been photographed".<sup>58</sup>

This notion of a moment of inter-subjective union seems to be enveloped within a notion of maternal embrace, a memory of a lost union which is borne out throughout *Camera Lucida*.<sup>59</sup> According to Carol Armstrong, Barthes' text is written under the sign of the Mother, as a kind of search for origin narrated through the medium of the "conspicuously absent" photograph of the writer's mother.<sup>60</sup> Refusing his reader visual access to the lost maternal subject he yearns for and whose essence he finds in the infamous Winter Garden portrait, Barthes' text (like Anzieu's theory) is haunted by the unseen, unheard maternal subject on whom it is pinned. Cut out of the visual frame of reference, the maternal figure leaves just her skin as a photograph, an image hidden from prying eyes, excised from the text to become a purely phantasmatic surface on which the writer's own dream of reunion is played out.

Barthes' interplay of text and photographic image weaves a kind of memory-skin, a reparative surface through which a moment of inter-subjective union is imagined, the unknown photograph functioning as a space of reparation, an endlessly deferred promise of blissful reunion. But in Woodman's photographic conjuring of an uneasy relationship to the maternal body, such a promise of reparation is always denied. Rather than the seductive promise of re-forging an umbilical, inter-subjective connection, Woodman's photographs offer a more disturbing relationship to such an encounter. Each print's surface, whilst remaining smooth and homogenous, articulates the photograph's own internal break-down. Each surface is painfully scored and cracked, and her figuration of torn integuments and blistering and parched membranes suggests a

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. .

<sup>59</sup> See Carol Armstrong's interesting discussion of Barthes' text in her essay 'From Clementina to Käsebier: The Photographic Attainment of the "Lady Amateur"' in *October* 91 (Winter 2000). Peggy Phelan also reads the maternal subtext in Barthes' text as a search for his lost mother in her essay on photography included in *Unmarked – The Politics of Performance* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993). Margaret Iversen interprets *Camera Lucida* in relation to Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, linking the light and the gaze, reading Barthes' *punctum* as a necessarily missed encounter with the Real. See her 'What is a Photograph?' in *Art History*, vol. 17, no. 3 (September 1994).

<sup>60</sup> Armstrong, 'From Clementina to Käsebier', p. 104.

scraping, excoriating action, one which recalls Biven's interpretation of Sylvia Plath's aggressive attack on the mother introject.

But just as Woodman's found textures seem carefully chosen to function as the perfect medium for such metaphoric acts of aggression, so the artist's technique launches a similar attack on the photograph itself. In all of these photographs, every detail of the wall's degraded paint and deteriorating plaster is carefully exposed, each blemish appearing to be inscribed into the photograph's own surface. In *Space Squared*, the searing light streaming through the windows not only bleaches out all exterior detail in a white-hot haze, but also destroys the photograph's own frame. The cross-bars of the sash windows are only just discernible. By refusing to use the techniques of dodging and burning at the stage of developing the print, Woodman has chosen to include only the over-exposed space of the glass, whose almost-opaque brightness has wiped out the window-frames' top corners. Almost opaque, the light from these rectangular openings seems to leach out into the space off-frame, paradoxically dense blanks which obscure the photograph's own edges. With no framing corners, the photograph's detail is uncontained, as if liable to filter out through these 'rents' in the print's surface.

A similarly burnt effect is found in the untitled shot (fig. 2.10), as the scrap of torn paper resting against Woodman's legs not only appears like a rent in the photograph's surface, but almost like a flame, a blistering, melting void in the surface. Developed as a bright white scorch in this positive print, it seems to evoke its own inverse, the inky depth of a black hole burnt into the fragile skin of the negative. Disrupting the photograph's containing frame, and seeming to burn and rupture its smooth, glossy skin, Woodman upsets its function as a depository of time gone by, of nostalgic remembrance and phantasmatic reunion.

The photograph's temporal containment is further upset by Woodman's inclusion of blurred movement: in the untitled shot (fig. 2.18), by moving her paper shell over her body, or caught in the act of re-emerging from beneath its shadow, Woodman's body is diffused into light, as if embodying that carnal, fleshy medium Barthes describes. Evidence of a performative gesture, the motion of the artist's body in time and space, the temporal instant of the 'cut' is just undone, just beginning to unravel. Undoing the precision of focus, the blur of motion suggests an analogous diffusion of the subject's



own borders. The spectatorial subject taking up the position of viewing which is coexistent with Woodman's abandoned position as photographer, is united in light with this unstable, fluctuating imaged subject. Caught up in a moment of ambiguous emerging and collapse, this identification provokes a moment of inter-subjective union, which, as Irigaray declares, is the fate of the derelict feminine subject. Not only cut off from any sense of continuity and identification with the lost maternal body, and alienated from the specificity of her own envelope of subjectivity, the derelict subject is condemned to lapse into moments of hazy and undefined inter-subjective fusion.<sup>61</sup>

In this abandoned and derelict house, devoid of traces of domestic bliss, Woodman becomes blurred and fused by light, merging into the walls, but also breaking free. To capture her image in flux, as a shape-shifting, ambiguous form, Woodman relinquished her presence behind camera, and took up her position under its gaze. Persisting as an unseen authorial presence looking back on herself, on her own displaced position as object of the image, Woodman's split presence seem evocative of that derelict subject at once abandoned and alienated, and animated and emerging. Echoing the processes of self-objectification inherent in the moment of the photograph's exposure, Woodman is detached from her subject position as producer of the image, as if cast out from her own skin. Like Plath, Woodman describes a moment in which this ambiguous state is replayed through the act of self-representation. As if seeing herself from the desolate distance of a star, Woodman looks back through the alienating photographic lens of displacement and memory, her print the surface upon which she conjures an impossible moment of beautiful fusion.

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<sup>61</sup> Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, p.81. Whitford describes the ways in which women cannot relate to each other except in pathologised ways, always experiencing a confusion of identity and the non-individuated relationships that are symptomatic of the feminine state of dereliction.

## 3

## Delicate cutting

When asked about Francesca Woodman's photographic practice, close friend Sloan Rankin offered the following opinion of the photographer's motivation:

She used her pictures to display her feelings. There's a range of them ... of hurting flesh, of mauling it in some way, scarring, marking, drawing on it. I don't think she was punishing herself, though she may have, but the emotion I think that you have of looking at the self-portrait with clothespins pinching the flesh is one of pain.<sup>1</sup>

Picking up on the frequency with which Woodman pictured her own skin subjected to acts which induce pain, Rankin describes either one of two untitled photographs Woodman took sometime over the period from 1972 and 1975, between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. Both show Woodman's naked body in close-up, seated against the exterior wall of a house, with her head and feet cropped by the photographs' framing edges. In one shot, (fig. 3.1), Woodman's left arm reaches toward the camera to trip the shutter, whilst in the other, (fig. 3.2), the slightly longer shot includes more of the background. In both Woodman's flesh is pinched by the wooden clothes pegs she has clamped to her nipples and painfully twisted folds of abdominal skin. A trace of tissue damage is visible in fig. 3.2, recorded as a bruised and angry weal under her left breast, indicative of the blood blistering just below the surface.

As Rankin points out, these photographs cannot fail to provoke a wincing response, as the imagery evokes so strongly the searing sensation of the wired jaws snapping at the soft skin. Seated underneath the eaves and against a wall, Woodman's form is further confined by the white boards and shadowy crevices of the clapboard, which mark a horizontal accent that threatens to slice the body as it is licked by the creeping tendrils of a domesticated garden plant. Congregated on her skin, the humble wooden pegs

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation comes from an essay written by Sloan Rankin, Woodman's sometime model and colleague at RISD. Entitled 'Francesca Woodman: Voyeurism among Friends', Rankin's essay offers some personal memories of the young photographer and her working practice, and was included by Gerard Malanga in his collection of unpublished photographs by 30 little known photographers working in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Malanga included an interview with each artist alongside their work; as the book was published in 1985, 4 years after Woodman's suicide in 1981, Rankin's essay appears instead, as she worked closely with Woodman, often collaborating with her in the production of her photographs. See Rankin's essay in Gerard Malanga (ed.), *Scopophilia, The Love of Looking* (New York: Alfred van der Marck Editions, 1985), p. 116.



configure a bodily cage of painful affect, enclosing her truncated form within an explicitly domestic framework.

Lucy Lippard noted in her 1973 article 'Household Images in Art' that female artists were at the time beginning to reclaim a right to use (traditionally debased) domestic imagery in order to expose the isolating confinement and drudgery of women's daily realities.<sup>2</sup> Recent art historical scholarship has re-visited the theme, focusing attention onto the ways in which the artist's own body was used in performances often staged within domestic settings in order to re-situate these perhaps essentialist statements of personal experience within a political economy of feminine subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> Helen Molesworth's 2000 article 'House Work and Art Work' examines Mierle Laderman Ukeles's performance of the labouring body within the institutionalized space of the art museum in her *Maintenance Art Performances* (1973-74), constructing a Foucauldian framework of the 'useful' body and elaborating its deformation through wearying acts of maintenance labour. Introducing domestic labour into this institutional space, Ukeles's act is interpreted as an exploration of the relationship between private and public space, which Molesworth discerns as a defining issue in any discussion of 1970s practice.<sup>4</sup> Kathy O'Dell re-situates Gina Pane's acts of bodily transgression performed within domesticated spaces in a similarly critical stance toward art's institutional spaces. Symbolic of the familial relationship, the home in which Pane performed a piece such as *Nourriture, actualités télévisées, feu* (1971) frames instances of intra-psychic encounter with the spectatorial subject, provoking the re-enactment of the Oedipal drama or mirror stage trauma. As such, the domestic site is here deployed as the original setting in which subjectivity is formed, and the model for all subsequent institutional contexts within which identity is re-worked and negotiated.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Household Images in Art' originally in *Ms.*, 1, no. 9 (March 1973), reprinted in *From the Center, Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Contemporary art historians have attempted to re-habilitate some female artists' practice of the period in order to situate the work within a more political framework; this aspect has been ignored or suppressed in the well-rehearsed debate over 1970s practices involving the body which have been subsequently subsumed beneath the (usually) derogatory rubric of essentialism. See for example Amelia Jones, *Body Art, Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, MN, & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Jeanie Forte, 'Focus on the Body: Pain, Praxis and Pleasure in Feminist Performance', in Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach (eds), *Critical Theory & Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992); and Helen Molesworth's recent essay 'House Work and Art Work', *October* 92 (Spring 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Molesworth, 'House Work and Art Work', p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Kathy O'Dell theorises the ways in which body-artists probed and re-played collectivised and social suffering in her exploration of what she calls 'masochistic performance'; O'Dell draws out a link between the institutionalised apparatuses of modernity (including the art gallery itself) and the formations and deformations of the subject, outlining the importance of using the body in re-staging moments in psychic development. In taking a "less clinical" approach to the problem of inflicting pain on the self, Kathy

It is tempting to consider Woodman's utilization of the domestic setting as the backdrop of her own acts of self-deformation within this framework. Her pegged body evokes the repetitive drudgery of the labour practices of washing and drying laundry, as if treating her own skin like a piece of wet clothing hung out on a line to dry; the pegs twist and distort the skin's surface, as if acting out through the body the ways in which feminine subjectivity is constantly produced and negotiated within the confining strictures of women's domestic roles. But it would be wrong to invest Woodman's practice with an overtly feminist intent. Although she was brought up within a creatively charged atmosphere by her artist parents and so thoroughly aware of developing movements in the art world surrounding her, Woodman was not consciously working to a political agenda.<sup>6</sup> The photographs under discussion here were produced prior to, or as part of her BFA degree at RISD, forming a body of experimental student work. With their "lapidary" beauty, and precious quality, her photographs are not involved with a project of institutional critique.<sup>7</sup> But as well as engaging with contemporaneous art practices in which female artists photographed their own (often naked) bodies, I want to suggest that Woodman's imagery here is also deeply involved with both the history of photographic imagery and the specific terms of the medium itself. It is my intention in this chapter to examine Woodman's staged acts of suggested pain in terms of a strategic consideration of the ways in which the conventions and processes of the photographic medium

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O'Dell uses the adjective 'masochistic' not to describe a pathological sexuality in a Freudian sense, but to map the relationship between the artistic body (in pain) and the spectatorial body (subjected to, or made complicit with, the representation of pain). See her *Contract With The Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Amelia Jones has considered similarly violent body-related practices, not only in terms of their problematic violation of the material body, but their strategic use of pain and 'decrepitude' in order to explore the idea of individual and collective psychic suffering. See Jones, *Body Art*.

<sup>6</sup> In her catalogue essay 'Essential Magic: The Photographs of Francesca Woodman' which was included in the catalogue *Francesca Woodman, Photographische Arbeiten/Photographic Works* (Zurich: Shedhalle & Münster: Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1992), Kathryn Hixson describes Woodman's work as 'proto-feminist' (p. 28). In conversation, Francesca's father George Woodman disparaged any readings of his daughter's photographs that imbue them with a specifically feminist intention, stating that although Woodman was very aware of contemporary political events and the growing impact of the women's movement and feminist art practice, her own photographic practice had no explicitly political content.

<sup>7</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Just Like a Woman' in *Photography at the Dock, Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 252). In this essay, Solomon-Godeau distances Woodman's practice from contemporary photography, saying that her exploration of experimental media (such as her use of the diazotype process on blueprint paper), serial and book forms, and the inclusion of cryptic texts means that her work has "not much in common with mainstream art photography of the 1970s or with the formalist modes privileged in art schools" (p. 242). Whilst in her essay 'Problem Sets' (in *Bachhelors* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1999)), Rosalind Krauss maintains that Woodman's photographs betray her formalist training through evidence of the working out of 'problem sets', I argue that they also show the influence not only of American modernist photography, but also the contemporary photography of artists such as Duane Michals, whom Woodman admired, and who similarly worked with serial form and text.



operate to elide subjectivity, through instances of metaphoric violence inflicted on her own self-image.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau has suggested that if Woodman's photography is related to any historical precedent "even superficially", it would be Surrealist photography.<sup>8</sup> This connection seems to be explicit in much of Woodman's imagery, and is perhaps most obviously stated in one of her late photographs taken in New York between 1979 and 1980 upon her return from her year spent studying in Rome (fig. 3.3). During her trip Woodman encountered many examples of Surrealist publications, writings and photographs, and the influence of this imagery seems to be inscribed in her iconography here. The anamorphic form of her body as it lays sprawled diagonally across the frame is foreshortened and strangely distorted, dismembered by the viewpoint and the edges of the shot, in a way that recalls many of Man Ray's cropped and shadowed female nudes. Susan Rubin Suleiman positions this example of Woodman's work in a more direct relationship to the history of Surrealist photography, considering it to be indicative of Woodman's knowledge of the later work of Hans Bellmer. Woodman's anamorphic nude, distorted through her manipulation of cropping and framing, seems almost derivative of a photograph Bellmer produced in 1958 (fig. 3.4). This image, which formed part of a more extensive series (figs. 3.4-3.7) all of which depict Bellmer's lover and 'muse' Unica Zürn, was used as the cover shot of the Spring edition of the journal *Le Surréalisme, même*, a journal Woodman no doubt had access to in the library at RISD (fig. 3.8).

To stage this photograph, Bellmer bound his model's body with string, so that her pale flesh appears to emerge from the dark background as a series of grotesque lumps. Zürn's head and face are excluded, and the angle from which the shot was taken means

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<sup>8</sup> Solomon-Godeau, 'Just Like a Woman', p. 242. Solomon-Godeau seems slightly hesitant to pin down Woodman's relationship to Surrealist photographic practice; she claims that "certain correspondances or similarities that one might note between surrealist photographs and Woodman's work are, most likely, fortuitous" (p. 242, n. 3). Solomon-Godeau states that the majority of Surrealist photographs were not published until the 1985 publication of Rosalind Krauss' two essays 'Photography in the Service of Surrealism', and 'Corpus Delicti' in Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston (eds), 'L'Amour Fou', (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985). Solomon-Godeau does note that Woodman's friendship with collector Timothy Baum may have exposed her to some of this material; however, Woodman also spent time a year in Rome where she frequented the *Libreria Maldoror*, a bookshop run by Giuseppe Casetti and Piero Missogi. In this shop Woodman encountered a wide range of Surrealist and Futurist publications, and it is highly likely that she was familiar with some of the journals from the library at RISD, and the influence of her artist parents. Details of Woodman's time in Rome are included in Elizabeth Janus' essay 'Un séjour romain' included in the exhibition catalogue Hervé Chandès (ed.), *Francesca Woodman* (Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain & Zurich-Berlin-New York: Scalo, 1998).

that the body has become strangely foreshortened, her spine forming a ridge along the deformed flesh.<sup>9</sup> Woodman's careful positioning of her own body in the untitled shot (fig. 3.3) suggests a conscious aping of Bellmer's own composition, and the quilts on which she rests echo the soft folds of the blanket on which Bellmer placed his model.

Suleiman suggests that Woodman's photography seems to 'speak' to Bellmer's, and posits the young photographer's work within an inter-generational and dialectical dialogue with this Surrealist forefather. Suleiman takes as another example Woodman's *Horizontale*, which was produced between 1976 and 1977 in her studio at RISD (fig. 3.9). In this shot, Woodman's body is cut-off just above the crotch in the top left corner, whilst her legs sprawl diagonally across the frame, her big toe just nudging toward the bottom right corner. Her legs have been carefully bound with shiny ribbon or tape, the ends tied at the ankle in neat knots, the folds of flesh echoing the female body bound in another of Bellmer's series (fig. 3.5). In this image, Zürn's body is again bound tightly, her head once more excluded, and her bared abdomen and thighs are revealed under her hitched up woollen sweater. Ventriloquising the artist, Suleiman imagines Woodman in dialogue with Bellmer, and recites her imaginary response to his imagery:

"Yes, a brilliant idea, to shoot the cropped body, headless, rendered strange, inhuman even – like a piece of meat – by the tightly wound string. But I can do you one better. My bound legs are strange, but their symmetrical, transparent bindings turn them into aesthetic objects, not meat. Your bindings are painful, ugly, irregular; mine are strangely beautiful, forming a pattern that plays against the geometric pattern of the rug below."<sup>10</sup>

The ribbon or tape with which Woodman bound her own flesh is not read in terms of eroticised bondage or painful constriction, but as a fabric which "merely covers" the artist's skin.<sup>11</sup> Although recognising the strange quality of the bound legs, Suleiman's description seems to defuse the imagery's effect, as the act of self-binding becomes a

<sup>9</sup> In her recent psychoanalytically informed interpretation of Bellmer's work, Sue Taylor notes the 'necrophilic' overtones of this image, in which the body takes on the appearance of dead meat, trussed up as if ready for cooking. Taylor points out that when it was published in *Le Surréalisme, même*, the photograph bore the caption '*tenir à frais*', or 'Keep in a cool place'. Taylor also notes that Bellmer's imagery is here indebted to the 'original surrealist image of bondage', Man Ray's *The Riddle* or *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* from 1920. See Taylor's *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 2000), p. 186, n. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance – Some Contemporary Women Artists and the Historical Avant-Garde', in Whitney Chadwick (ed.), *Mirror Images – Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1998), p. 146.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



purely visual aesthetic. Suleiman's formalist language brings to mind some of the interpretations of Bellmer's earlier photographs, in which problematic questions of the artist's intentionality and his role as coercive producer are suppressed.

For throughout Bellmer's series, there is an unavoidable sense of violence or at the very least the evocation of a painful state of bondage, as his female model's body is wrapped and bound with ordinary kitchen string, which as Suleiman notes, gives her flesh the appearance of being meat, ready for cooking. The body's deformed outline is further upset by the photographer's manipulation of framing, and Zürn's body is repeatedly cropped and truncated, her face consistently cut out, her skin bared.

Stephen Propokoff and Maarten van de Guchte have described this repetitive imagery of a truncated body as "a kind of landscape", in which Zürn's bound form becomes an "abstract field".<sup>12</sup> Their reading is exemplary of those interpretations of Bellmer's photographs which Sue Taylor has pointed out amount to a highly "sanitized reading of Bellmer's sadomasochistic elements".<sup>13</sup> Whilst interpreting the imaged subject as a "body-theater", a site of transformation in which the human form is made strange, dehumanised and debased, Propokoff and van de Guchte fail to address what is at stake in using the body of another as the fleshy material for painfully affective imagery of bondage.<sup>14</sup>

Sue Taylor uses a psychoanalytic framework to interpret Bellmer's imagery of bondage, suggesting the cruelty which is undoubtedly evident in this series speaks less of simple misogyny, than of the artist's own desire to be re-joined with the lost body of the maternal subject. Invoking analyst Robert Bak's theories of sadomasochistic perversion, Taylor discusses Bellmer's repeated production of imagery of tightly bound

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<sup>12</sup> See Stephen S. Propokoff and Maarten van de Guchte, 'New Realities, New Desires: The Photographs of Hans Bellmer' in the exhibition catalogue *Hans Bellmer – Photographs* (Urbana-Champaign, IL: Krannert Art Museum & University of Illinois, 1991), p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, p. 276, n. 55.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Taylor points out the way in which Propokoff and van de Guchte place Bellmer's imagery of bodily transformation in an anticipatory relationship with the body related practices of artists in the 1960s and 1970s. Whilst the authors include Gunther Brus, Hermann Nitzche, Rudolph Schwarskogler, Chris Burden, Bruce Nauman and Lucas Samaras 'among others' in their list, Taylor points out that the list omits female artists using the body, particularly Marina Abramovic, Eleanor Antin, Lynda Benglis, Mary Beth Edelson, Ana Mendieta, Ketty la Rocca, Gina Pane, Carolee Schneeman and Hannah Wilke. For Taylor, these omissions are, however, less surprising than the authors' "failure to distinguish between a group of artists who all use their *own* bodies as material and one who manipulates, as Bellmer does, the (submissive) body of another". See Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, p. 276, n. 55; and Propokoff and van de Guchte, 'New Realities, New Desires', p. 41.

female flesh as symptomatic of his own clinging need for maternal comfort, his own desire for reparation represented through the female body literally tied down with ropes.<sup>15</sup>

Such a sense of longing for the comfort of the motherly embrace seems to be suggested also through Bellmer's choice of settings, which Taylor recognises are throughout the series "entirely banal." One shot is staged in an ordinary bedroom (fig. 3.4), and glimpses of the corner of a mirror are included in the top left corner, whilst the anamorphic lump of Zürn's flesh rests on a woollen blanket and eiderdown. In other photographs, less background detail is included, but there is the same sense of ordinary, domestic space. In figs. 3.6 and 3.7, another tartan blanket is included, whilst in fig. 3.5, Zürn wears a woolly jumper and a plain white bra, an element of feminine dress which is repeated in fig. 3.6, as the string forms a bra-like configuration on her torso.

These details of domesticity construct a very ordinary setting here, which is exaggerated by Bellmer's use of a close-up viewpoint and shallow depth of field. What interests me in relation to Woodman's photography, is the way in which both photographers' markedly domestic settings seem to heighten the impact of their figurations of the female body undergoing staged acts of apparently painful manipulation. Like Bellmer, Woodman used quilts and blankets in her photographs. In the untitled shot from New York (fig. 3.3), the pale folds of the textured blanket and the patterned checks of the patchwork quilt echo Bellmer's use of the tartan blanket and eiderdowns. In *Horizontale*, (fig. 3.9) the patchwork quilt appears again, this time as a kind of floor cloth on which the low, wooden stool is placed. With her legs tightly bound with ordinary string, the undulations of her flesh disrupt the outline of her body, upsetting the beauty and smoothness of the nude.<sup>16</sup> Making reference to the traditional codes of Western artistic representation of the female nude, Woodman's title here perhaps refers to the tradition of the *grande horizontale*. By re-situating the art historical nude within ordinary domestic space, Woodman subverts these codes. No longer reclining upon luxurious silk or velvet, Woodman's *odalisque* takes up a more upright position on a low wooden stool, and the sumptuous fabrics have been replaced with a slightly grubby quilt. She cuts out her face and her breasts, and whilst the framing of the shot

<sup>15</sup> See Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, p. 187.

<sup>16</sup> See Lynda Nead's discussion of the female nude in *The Female Nude, Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London & New York: Routledge 1992).



concentrates the gaze onto the lower half of her body, Woodman's striped and woolly glove becomes the humble and domestic equivalent to the pale hand of Manet's *Olympia* pressed over her genitals.<sup>17</sup>

But in this image, elements of the domestic setting themselves function to constrict and contain the body. The dark blocks and diagonal bands of the patchwork quilt, and the intersecting bars and shadows of the stool and the skirting board behind construct a grid-like formation in which Woodman's body is framed. Contained within this crazed domestic pattern, the artist's body is marked with the bands of the ribbon binding and the linearity of the strange double registration of her left leg. Exaggerating this sense of constriction, the repetitive lines also reduce the outline and contours of Woodman's body to a similarly fractured surface pattern. This careful manipulation of a domestic setting to invokes such states of confinement recurs throughout the whole of Woodman's work: in a very early photograph, taken whilst still at high school, Woodman appears, dressed up in her childish and Alice-like costume (fig. 3.10). She has positioned herself under the glass top of a coffee table, and she peers up from beneath its translucent surface. At once suppressed and emerging from the corners and crevices of the home, she appears almost as if submerged, drowning within the shallow depth of the photographic space, which echoes the cramped and airless confinement suggested by this domestic interior.

By figuring the photographic field as a claustrophobic and constricting space, Woodman's imagery seems carefully chosen to expose the ways in which all photographic portraits operate to fragment their subject in some way, and as such seems created in a dialogue with another photographic precedent. Whilst she was undoubtedly engaged with the themes and iconography of Surrealist photography, these works indicate a relationship with another body of photography, which during the 1970s would have constituted a popular definition of 'fine art'. By showing the artist's naked body within shallow interior spaces, and deformed by the application of domestic tools and everyday objects, Woodman's photographs seem to both mimic and upset a tradition of

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<sup>17</sup> Suleiman describes this glove as "both a humorous appropriation of the Surrealist fetish and an ironic critique of Surrealist fetishism – which, like all fetishism, posits woman as a 'hole' to be covered." (in 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance', p. 147). I discuss Woodman's use of the glove as a prop which recurs throughout her photographic practice in the fourth chapter of this thesis, a version of which is to be published as 'A Disappearing Act: Francesca Woodman's *Portrait of a Reputation* in *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2004) (in press).

American formalist photography, in which the female nude was frequently rendered as a truncated form on black and white film. Woodman's representation of herself as a decapitated, faceless form in shallow depth of field, recalls those codes of representation endlessly repeated in the work of modernist 'masters' of photography such as Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand.

Whilst Woodman was less concerned with the modernist photographer's obsession with the achievement of a 'perfect' technique, or the use of a full tonal range and sensitive renderings of light and shade, the way in which she represented her own body re-iterate these pre-existing conventions of nude photography. The way in which she truncated her torso in figs. 3.1 and 3.2 echoes the headless and limbless body imaged in an example such as Paul Strand's *Torso* from 1930 (fig. 3.11). Cut off just above the breasts, the body is visually chopped to fit the frame, the legs 'dismembered' at the tip of the pubic triangle. One arm is partially included, but twisted behind the model's back, appearing foreshortened and deformed.

The codified representation of the naked female form as a dislocated body fragmented to fit the photographic frame with which Woodman's self-representation seems most engaged is perhaps best epitomized by Alfred Stieglitz's nude representations of the artist Georgia O'Keefe. One such nude from 1918, entitled *Georgia O'Keefe, A Portrait (Torso)* (fig. 3.12), forms just one unit from Stieglitz's series of over three hundred photographs taken over a period of twenty years, all of which show various parts of O'Keefe's body.<sup>18</sup> Some of the photographs are head-shots, traditional portraits which record the serial project's temporal continuity through the depiction of the artist's changing face. Others concentrate on her hands, or her neck, or her hair.<sup>19</sup> Stieglitz gave his series the collective title of *Georgia O'Keefe, A Portrait*, creating a sense of coherence or unity that is at odds with the conglomerate nature of a portrait made-up from the accumulation of so many disparate parts.

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<sup>18</sup> A selection of these photographs was finally published in 1978 under the title of *Georgia O'Keefe, A Portrait* by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<sup>19</sup> Stieglitz divided his photographs of O'Keefe into six categories: 'A Woman', 'Hands', 'Feet', 'Hands and Breasts', 'Torsos', and 'Interpretations'. According to the photographer, each of these categories were a "demonstration of portraiture", suggesting that the subject could be reduced to a simple body part, and also that each fragment also came to be a portrait in its own right. See Marcia Brennan's discussion of the series in *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory – The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 2001), p. 83.



The series' internal fragmentation seems condensed, or re-described within the single frame of this example. O'Keefe is depicted in close-up, seated in a very shallow space, with her robe hanging loosely at her sides to reveal her naked torso. Her head, face, arms and legs are cut off, cast out of the frame. With no trace of O'Keefe's identity included, Stieglitz's photographic technique here serves his confessed aim of depersonalisation, as he stated that he wanted to express "bits of universality in the shape of Woman".<sup>20</sup> Laying claim to a transcendent vision capable of portraying a spurious notion of an essential femininity, one dependent on the visual fragmentation of the female artist's body, Stieglitz distances his photographic project from one of portraiture. By having her portrait reduced to the depiction of just her body in this example, O'Keefe's identity is further displaced by Stieglitz's strategy of cropping, a technique which decontextualizes its subject as it is reduced to fit the photographic frame, in which no traces of the background are included. Extricated from its bodily whole, each fragmented portion of the body diverts attention away from any detail of subjectivity, in so doing accentuating its formal qualities, line and contour.<sup>21</sup> Facilitating an abstract reading, the process of decontextualization is achieved through the modernist mechanisms of fragmentation and repetition.

It was only through this process of fragmentation that Stieglitz felt able fully to depict his subject. His collective portrait is made up of the fragments, predicated on an internal fracturing which seems to disrupt the notion of the portrait itself. In this example, the idea of the portrait seems to be displaced onto O'Keefe's body: with her head cut from the frame, her torso seems to take on the appearance of a face. By picturing her own body in similar way, Woodman constructs her self-image within this same convention. In figs. 3.1 and 3.2, Woodman's head is cut off by the top framing edge, and the close-up view (more exaggerated in fig. 3.1) further extricates the body from its environment. By cutting out her limbs and her face, Woodman's torso becomes the focus of attention, and assumes a face-like configuration. Nipples become fleshy eyes, and the navel takes the place of a mouth.

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<sup>20</sup> Alfred Stieglitz to Anne W. Brigman, December 24, 1919, quoted by David P. Peeler in *The Illuminating Mind in American Photography: Stieglitz, Strand, Weston, Adams* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001), p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> David Peeler, *The Illuminating Mind*, p. 67. See also Brennan, *Painting Gender*, and John Pultz, *Photography and the Body* (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 1995).

But unlike Stieglitz's shot of O'Keefe's own visage-like torso, in which the skin remains smoothed, Woodman deforms her own 'face'. Disrupting her bodily 'self-portrait', Woodman disfigures this face by using the pegs to twist her eye-like nipples, as if alluding to a painful blinding action, whilst the 'lips' of her navel are squeezed, as if clamping shut the mouth's jaws. Upsetting the formal beauty of this 'face', Woodman's staged attack suggests the occlusion of her gaze, echoing the exclusion of her real eyes, and the muting of her voice, thereby suturing a means of self-expression.

Just as the method of framing destroys visual access to the face in which the promise of identity or a coherent subjectivity might be found, so Woodman's manipulation of her torso suggests another kind of violence on that already excluded face, and on the very idea of the portrait itself. In another untitled photograph (fig. 3.13), taken at RISD during the same period as *Horizontale* discussed above, Woodman has framed her naked torso. No longer bound by tape, or pinched with wooden pegs, Woodman's skin is instead kneaded and moulded in the artist's hands.<sup>22</sup> Her own flesh becomes a sculptural material in her hands, and by squeezing the skin of her abdomen to form lines and curves, her torso seems to smile.

Such a strategic use of humour deflates the ideal of the abstracted universality Stieglitz sought in his similarly framed images of O'Keefe, the young female photographer's own body laughing in the face of her modernist predecessor. Of course, as David Peeler points out, Stieglitz's vision of an abstracted and universal image of Woman was neither objective nor transcendent, but decidedly earthy.<sup>23</sup> O'Keefe's image becomes the surface onto which his own sexualised desire is projected. By excluding his model's face, Stieglitz not only upsets the function of the traditional portrait, but reconfigures the female artist's image within a code of representation common in pornographic photography, in which the denial of the nude's specificity portrays her as "psychologically vacant" — truly an object.<sup>24</sup> As James Elkins notes, with no access to the imaged subject's face, the possibility of any viewing relationship is occluded, as is any possibility of a reciprocal desiring gaze. Casting his subject out of the frame, Stieglitz's project of fragmentation is implicated within a masculine system of

<sup>22</sup> Suleiman has suggested that this image 'speaks' to Magritte's painting *Le Viol*, Woodman's use of her own body an act of reclamation. See Suleiman, 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance', p. 150.

<sup>23</sup> Peeler, *The Illuminating Mind*, p. 70.

<sup>24</sup> James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body, Pain and Metamorphosis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 195.



representation in which, as Luce Irigaray outlines, the feminine subject is denied wholeness, self-reflection, or the specificity of her own desire, a subject who experiences selfhood “only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) ‘subject’ to reflect himself”.<sup>25</sup>

In the photographs under discussion here, images in which Woodman manipulates the range of her camera to achieve a similarly closely cropped image, it is her own self which is at stake. As the artist pushes traces of her own identity and subjectivity out into the margins beyond the frame of representation, in what might be interpreted as a strategic fragmentation enacted precisely to deny the possibility of any spectatorial relationship with her own elided subjectivity, Woodman also exposes the inherently gendered structures of desire which condition the gaze upon her body.

But Woodman insisted on including certain traces of her own individuality, details of her own identity such as the snake-like coils of the silver ring that adorns her index finger in fig. 3.2. Her grubby and unwashed hand in fig. 3.1 points to the physicality of the body, the reality of the artist’s lived experience, which is heightened by her placement of this body firmly against the wall of a domestic home, a geographically specific location. The physical discomfort produced in the twisted skin insists on the materiality of the flesh, introducing a dichotomy of sensual pleasure and visceral pain that upsets any rhetoric of abstraction within which her fragmented torso could be described.

The staging of painful acts on her own skin also alludes to the ‘violence’ acted upon the subject in the process of photographic representation. The brutal framing she subjects her own body to brings to mind photography’s lexicon of implicit aggression, one in which a subject is ‘shot.’ The camera is loaded with film and pointed at its ‘victim’, the shutter triggered, and resulting negatives perhaps sliced or cut, the image cropped during enlarging, with under-exposed details burnt into the light-sensitive surface of the

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<sup>25</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (trans. Catherine Porter) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 30. This text was originally published in French as *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977). This is interesting as Stieglitz also saw his serial portrait of O’Keefe as constitutive of a self-portrait, his own subjectivity portrayed through his disembodied camera gaze, produced through the fragmented body of the female artist, her evacuated subjectivity and body the mirror for his own transcendence.



print. When applied to projects of self-representation, this vocabulary takes a more sinister turn, suggestive of a mutilation acted out upon the artist's own self-image, an attack on her own subjectivity.

This metaphoric violence is exposed in Woodman's decapitation and cropping of her own body, as the top edge of the photograph cuts across the base of her throat in fig. 3.2, whilst the bottom edge chops off her calves, a slicing action that is echoed in the horizontal accent of the grabbing jaws of the pegs in fig. 3.1. Pulling her flesh away from her skeletal frame, the pegs disfigure the border of her skin, at the same time disrupting the outline of her photographed body, drawn in light. The unexpected shadows and peaks so convincingly described in fig. 3.2 hint at a possible transgression of the borders of the body. This potential disruption resists what Lynda Nead has described as essential to the Western art historical tradition of the female nude, a representational trope which is dependent on the smooth and uninterrupted framing of the female body in an act of fetishistic completion, as the body's orifices are shored up to create the phantasy of phallic wholeness.<sup>26</sup>

A more subtle sense of 'violence' is suggested in another two photographs: one untitled shot, taken between 1975 and 1976, shows a clothed figure (which appears to be Woodman herself) holding a small pane of glass against her face, compressing the soft flesh of her cheek and squashing her right eye (fig. 3.14). Light bounces off the glass, its shiny surface deflecting our gaze and obscuring her features, the darkly edged 'window' that frames her face a paradoxically near-opaque field. In the other later shot, (taken at RISD between 1975 and 1978), Woodman lies naked on the floor of her studio space, pressing another pane of glass against her face (fig. 3.15). Her features are again squashed and distorted by its flat surface, as the rectilinear field of the glass echoes the mirror which lies next to her body, as if upsetting the reassuring function of that space of reflection and self-representation. But the pane of glass also repeats the frame of the photograph itself, pressing against her face as if alluding to ways in which the subject is confined by the camera's distorting perspective as she is flattened to fit the two-dimensional surface of the image.

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<sup>26</sup> See Nead's discussion, in *The Female Nude*, pp. 5-12.



Woodman's distortion and obfuscation of her face could be read in terms of a self-conscious strategy of deforming the female body, performed in order to upset artistic convention and the format of the photographic self-portrait. Such a project of critique had been undertaken a few years earlier by Ana Mendieta, through a performative series of photographs that Woodman may have known. Produced as an ongoing project during February and March of 1972 at the University of Iowa, Mendieta's *Glass on Body* was recorded as a series of thirteen photographs (fig. 3.16), each of which shows the artist in a similar act of fleshy manipulation, pressing a pane of glass against various parts of her face and body.<sup>27</sup>

In one unit from the series, Mendieta holds the glass against her cheek, her mouth becoming a strangely distorted series of curved folds; another shows the edge of the glass undercutting the artist's eyebrow, positioned precariously close to the delicate skin of the eye. A further instance shows Mendieta's face straight-on, and whilst her eyes and forehead are apparently untouched by the pane's surface, her mouth and the tip of her nose have become entirely squashed. In this shot Mendieta has not included her hands holding the pane, and its transparency means that at first glance the glass seems invisible, the artist's deformed features seemingly unmanipulated. But light has picked up the plane of the bottom edge, making a strangely bright borderline which cuts diagonally across the artist's throat. The distortion done to her face under the glass is interpreted by Jane Blocker as an act of "carnavalesque perversion", a commentary on normative ideals of female beauty within societal and art historical convention.<sup>28</sup> In this example, by seeming to deny the existence of the pane of glass, Mendieta uses its translucency as analogous to the codes of the photographic portrait's own surface, like an invisible but deforming screen under which identity, or the artist's subjectivity, becomes crushed, distorted, and made strange through the act of representation.

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<sup>27</sup> It is not known whether or not Woodman was aware of this performance or had ever seen the photographs, but it is highly possible as she was very involved within the art world centred on New York, and these images were undoubtedly circulating at the time. Although George Woodman could not offer evidence of Francesca's knowledge of Mendieta's work specifically, he is of the opinion that his daughter's photography was imbricated within the history and culture of performance art of the period, and that her work is certainly invested with a highly performative element.

<sup>28</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 11. A similar consideration of ways in which female artists have imaged the transgressive body is discussed by Marsha Meskimmon in 'The Monstrous and the Grotesque' in *MAKE* (Oct/Nov 1996).

But this act of carnivalesque transgression takes a more sinister turn in the latter half of the series, as Mendieta takes the pane of glass to the flesh of her body. In these shots, a more violent emphasis on the glass pane's sharp edge is suggested, as Mendieta holds it against her skin to suggest a cutting action. Held under one breast in one shot, the pane's clean edge is positioned as if about to slice off the rounded flesh, whilst in another, the top corners of the glass press into the skin. The final photograph of the series shows Mendieta's body in close up, from above her abdomen to the top of her thighs: this time the glass is held against her navel and her pubis, its bottom edge registered as a searing white line cutting across her pubic hair.

Mary Sabbatino reads Mendieta's placement of the glass on her skin as a radical adjustment of the "classic window in modernism", as the artist used the device to direct the spectatorial gaze onto her body.<sup>29</sup> Collapsing onto the flesh the window through which the ideally disembodied modernist gaze is controlled and tamed, Mendieta drew attention to the conditions of viewing in which the spectator is embroiled, elucidating the gaze here as one that fragments its object. To produce each of the photographs, Mendieta must have paused every now and then to have a shot taken, posing for the camera whilst keeping the pane of glass still for just a second before moving it once more, changing its position on her skin. The manipulation of the glass frame throughout the duration of the performance (which itself took place over a period of a month) itself became a process of vacillating fragmentation and re-constitution of the whole, a process which is echoed by the resulting photographs' serial format.

Mendieta's glass pane also mimics the photograph's own flat, translucent field, and by using herself as her repeated photographic subject, her fragmenting gestures bring to mind Metz's comparison of the photograph and the fetish, locating the artist's action within an economy of Freudian fetishism. By offering to the viewer the "fetishistic pleasure of framing-deframing" her body, a pleasure engendered through the artist's perpetual movement of the glass over the surface of her own body, Mendieta acts out a "constant and teasing displacement of the cutting line".<sup>30</sup> Whilst investing her action with a filmic quality of progression, by drawing attention to that "cutting line", Mendieta's performance is itself fractured, prefiguring its recording as a sequence of

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<sup>29</sup> Mary Sabbatino, 'Ana Mendieta: Identity and the *Siluetas Series*' in Gloria Moure (ed.), *Ana Mendieta* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, SA & Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, 1996), p. 151.

<sup>30</sup> Christian Metz, 'Photography and Fetish', *October* 34 (Fall 1985), p. 89.



discrete photographic units. Like the pane of glass, the photograph's framing edge symbolizes a "definitive cutting off which figures castration and is figured by the 'click' of the shutter".<sup>31</sup> Whilst re-playing this castrative 'cut' on her own body, most explicitly in the two final images in which the glass pane's bottom edge becomes a horizontal incision across her pubis, Mendieta's continual manipulation of the glass throughout the performance elaborates the fetishistic paradox of belief and denial.

Such a literal space of fetishistic disavowal is described in similarly evocative imagery in a further two untitled photographs Woodman produced between 1975 and 1976 (figs. 3.17 and 3.18). Making an exaggerated reference to the 'brutality' of the act of photographic framing, in one (fig. 3.17), Woodman presses a similarly small pane of glass against her torso, its bottom edge disappearing into shadowy indistinction in the dark space between her thighs. This castrative thrust is repeated in fig. 3.18. Having turned the pane through ninety degrees, Woodman holds the glass almost gingerly in her clenched fists. Its edges rest against the soft skin of her inner thighs, meeting to form a corner, whose triangular shape overlays her own pubic triangle. Although in places clear and transparent, in other parts the surface of the glass has become too shiny and strangely reflective, and deflects the gaze away from the female body's 'lack' which the sharp glass corner seems to both repeat and expose. Woodman's paralipsistic framing of her own sex visually re-enacts a fetishistic operation of avowal and disavowal, constructing a space of phantasmatic lack and wholeness, whilst aping conventions of pornographic display of the female body. The mirror-like surface of reflection and self-display becomes a means through which the artist's body is ultimately obscured, her own exposure remaining irrevocably veiled.

By compressing the glass edges against her skin, Woodman alludes not only to a psychic fantasy of castration, but to actual cutting, echoing the photographic process in which a subject is framed. Flattening her nipple, the apex of the sharp glass corner in fig. 3.17 is embedded in the soft skin of the aureole, its surface threatening to rupture. Echoing the violence of framing, the glass edge against her skin repeats the sharp precision of the decapitating, framing edge slicing across her throat, as if to illustrate on the flesh what for photographic theorist Philippe Dubois characterises the very essence of the photographic act. For Dubois, the frame of the photograph does not merely

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

*contain* an imaged field, but is like a cutting device which is inflicted on the subject under the camera's gaze. Unlike the constructive formation of the act of painting, in which detail is built up to fit within its pre-existing and limiting frame, the photograph depends on the *coupe*: its image is not produced, but *deduced*, cut out from its surroundings, in a reductive act of *soustraction*, of *découpage*, of sampling, detachment and isolation.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike Metz's description of the photograph as a partial object, a fragment cut from its referent, by drawing attention to the pressure of the glass edge against her soft skin, Woodman's staged framing dramatizes the instant of cutting as a process, rather than its fragmented end result. It is this *act* which Dubois emphasizes: likening the camera apparatus to the cutting edge of a knife, or the rasping blade of a razor, the action of the shutter is one of slicing and sectioning, the negative bearing the impression of the instant of exposure as an isolated and detached spatio-temporal "*tranche*".<sup>33</sup> As if smeared between the glass surfaces of a microscope slide, the photograph carves its impression in, and from, the living flesh, excising it from the world as it is "*taillée dans le vif*".<sup>34</sup> Snapped shut, the click of the shutter extricates its subject, at the same time carving its impression onto the skin of the negative itself.

That the photograph has a skin-like quality has often been noted: in *Camera Lucida*, the bodily terms used by Barthes to describe the light-rays which leave their trace on the negative's delicate emulsion lend the print an intimate quality. Describing the fleshy "umbilical cord" that links his gaze to the imaged body, Barthes imagines the photograph as a surface which both distills and spreads out this carnal light, becoming a kind of shared skin.<sup>35</sup> Like a skin, the negative's sensitive emulsion covers the gelatinous substrate of the film, a sensate surface which bears the indexical trace of its imaged subject, forging an intimate and persistent connection to the body which is threatened by the photograph's own cut.

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<sup>32</sup> Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte Photographique et Autre Essais* (Brussels: Labor, 1990), p. 153. Dubois states: 'L'image-act photographique interrompt, arrête, fixe, immobilise, détache, décolle la durée, en n'en saisissant qu'un seul instant. Spatialement, de la même manière, elle fractionne, prélève, extrait, isole, capte, découpe une portion d'étendue.'

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 'La photo apparaît ainsi, au sens fort, comme une tranche, une tranche unique et singulière d'espace-temps, littéralement taillée dans le vif'.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



By closely pressing the glass plate against her own body, Woodman makes obvious this metaphoric connection to the skin, whilst suggesting a similarly ambiguous state of intimacy and possible extrication. Figuring the optical ground deep within the body of the camera, the glass pane echoes the dark geometric field onto which the world is projected. Its rectilinear format also suggests other photograph spaces — the impressionable field of the negative, the glass plates into which the negative is clamped in the jaws of the enlarging apparatus, the field of the enlarging glass itself, and the sheen of the positive print's chemical surface. Framed and compressed under the pane of glass, Woodman's skin is threatened by these symbolic photographic spaces probing her flesh. In the act of re-staging these acts of metaphoric aggression on her body, as if predicting the excision of her subjectivity suggested by the dismembered and decapitated self-image made visible in the final print, Woodman puts her own skin under threat of being cut. Photographic frame, glass field and bodily skin are conflated, as if performing on her own body Dubois' description of the instant of the photographic *coupe* as it cuts into the 'flesh'.

It is interesting to consider this metaphoric articulation of self-inflicted cutting within a discourse contemporary with the period in which Woodman produced these images. During the late 1960s and 1970s, a strand of psychoanalytic thought, whose descriptive terminology resonates with this language of photographic cutting, took as its object of investigation the problematic issue of self-inflicted pain. Disentangling acts of self-harming from masochistic scenarios in which sexual gratification was the ultimate aim, the act of inflicting pain on the subject's own body was also re-interpreted in the early 1970s as an act performed in order to promote well-being or a kind of self-healing.<sup>36</sup> Evidence not of suicidal intent, but conversely as an attempt to repair a diffused or fractured subjectivity performed in order to re-claim psychic stability, the act of self-harming underwent a theoretical project of reconsideration.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (trans. Richard Howard)(London: Vintage, 1991), p. 81 (originally published as *La Chambre Claire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980).

<sup>36</sup> The theme of masochism was theorized by Gilles Deleuze in *Sacher-Masoch, An Interpretation*, (with entire text of *Venus in Furs*, from a French rendering by Aude Willm (trans. Jean McNeil) (London: Faber & Faber, 1971) which was first published in French in 1967, and appeared in English in 1971. In his psychoanalytic introduction to Sacher-Masoch's book Deleuze draws out the theory of the contract staged between 'victim' and 'aggressor' within the scenario of masochism. It is this relationship of power and collusion that O'Dell draws upon in her own theory of the 'masochistic performance' art of the 1970s (see O'Dell, *Contract With the Skin*).

<sup>37</sup> It is thought that self-cutting provoked such interest during the period in both the United States and in the UK due to a sudden increase in its incidence, although there is little hard data to support this theory. See Armando Favazza's *Bodies Under Siege – Self-Mutilation and Body Modification in Culture and*



Whilst an element of visual display is at the heart of some mutilative practices, in which the skin is scarred or painted in the production of a socialised subjectivity, it is not this sense of the culturally marked body that I wish to relate to Woodman's thematisation of cutting.<sup>38</sup> Nor is it my intention to suggest that Woodman's photographs betray a desire to self-harm. Far from it, as this would not only serve a useless purpose of pathologising the artist, but would also fall into the trap of reinforcing a link with a debased notion of innate feminine masochism.<sup>39</sup> Instead, I wish to consider how Woodman's suggested mutilation stages certain processes inherent in photographic image-making, as she acts out the drama of self-objectification on her own skin.

One strand of the rapidly growing literature on self-harming practices from the period diverted from a concern with outward displays of socialised identity, and instead turned its attention to more private acts of self-aggression. Explored extensively during this period, the practice which came to be known as 'delicate self-cutting' was diagnosed as a repetitive act in which the skin becomes the site of attack. Usually performed only on the "superficial" layers of the epidermis, so as to be non-fatal in effect and intention, the self-cutter slices, scrapes and scratches their own skin.<sup>40</sup>

Armando Favazza, a theorist who was investigating this area throughout the 1970s, related the practice to the nineteenth century, both to the vaudeville acts of the 'human pincushions' on display throughout Europe, and to an 'hysterical' act in which women slid pins and needles beneath their skin. By relating what he saw as an emerging

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*Psychiatry* (first published in 1987 (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press), this edition (Baltimore, MD & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 136. This book, researched throughout the 1970s and finally published in 1987, encompasses anthropological observations, cultural theory and psychoanalytic interpretations of mutilative practices.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Favazza describes the skin's function as a social 'billboard' on which social status is permanently displayed through tribal scarifications or tattooing, and on which temporary emotional states such as shame or fear are expressed.

<sup>39</sup> As Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis suggest in their discussion of the problematic aesthetics of pain in 1970s art practice (exemplified by Gina Pane's transgressive performance), the promulgation of the 'wound' as a mechanism for the expression of the artist's own subjectivity can all too easily be re-absorbed into a patriarchal art-institution "notion of beautiful pain, distanced suffering, and a whole legacy of exquisite female martyrdom." See their 'Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making' in Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer & Joanna Frueh (eds), *Feminist Art Criticism – An Anthology* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988), p. 90.

<sup>40</sup> See Ping-Nie Pao, 'The Syndrome of Delicate Self-Cutting', *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 42 (1969), p. 195. Also, Harold Graff and Richard Mallin, 'The Syndrome of the Wrist Cutter', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 124 (1967); Howard Gethin Morgan, *Death Wishes? The Understanding and Management of Deliberate Self-Harm* (Chichester: Wiley, 1979), and Robert Robertson Ross and Hugh Bryan McKay, *Self-Mutilation* (Lexington Books, 1979).



contemporary phenomenon to examples from history, Favazza imbricated the problem within an historical discourse of pathologised feminine subjectivity and exhibitionist self-display.<sup>41</sup> Whilst it may be true that the usual self-cutter or carver is young and female, there is the sense in which the literature within which the practice is recorded, interpreted and theorised constructs it as an intrinsically feminine practice. Located in domestic space, inflicted with everyday tools of feminised labour, and carried out in private, the act of cutting becomes intimately interwoven within the construction of a pathological feminine subjectivity.<sup>42</sup>

Usually carried out in the privacy of the home, perhaps behind the locked door of the bathroom or in the intimate space of the bedroom, the act of cutting is firmly situated within the domestic interior. This feminised quality is further reflected in the cutter's choice of instrument, a list of domestic implements which includes sewing scissors, needles and "pins stolen from the sewing room", along with pieces of broken china, nail files, small shards of mirror, tweezers, kitchen knives, razor blades and "utensils smuggled from the dining room".<sup>43</sup> Furtively hoarded, these tools of vanity and feminine adornment, of domestic labour and the craft-practices of sewing, are turned against the body. No longer spaces of self-reflection or the application of beautifying cosmetics, shards of mirror become sharp-edged tools. Rather than using the tweezers' points or the razor's edge to remove hair and perfect the ideally smooth skin of the female body, the sharpness of the tools is exploited in order to attack the feminised surface they are more usually used to create.

The clothes pegs with which Woodman distorted and pinched her flesh and the mirror-like plate of glass she pressed against her skin resonate with these feminine tools,

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<sup>41</sup> This is echoed in the more recent connection of self-cutting to Borderline Personality Disorders. See for example Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege*.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 136. The feminine emphasis in the practice has been reflected in recent years as the literature on the subject has taken a more feminist slant, and has also shifted away from psychoanalytic interpretation or suggestions for treatment and focused on issues of self-help, and the development of safe practices. See for example Gloria Babiker & Lois Arnold, *The Language of Injury, Comprehending Self-Mutilation* (Leicester: The British Psychological Society, 1997), who move away from a reading of the self-cutting subject as automatically pathological. Other works with an emphasis on the female subject include Diane Harrison, *Vicious Circles, An Exploration of Women and Self-Harm in Society* (London: GPMH Publications, 1995); Kim Hewitt, *Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997); Gerrilyn Smith, Dee Cox & Jacqui Saradjian, *Women and Self-Harm* (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1998); and Marilee Strong, *A Bright Red Scream – Self-Mutilation and the Language of Pain* (London: Viking Penguin, 1998, republished in 2000 by Virago, London).

<sup>43</sup> Robertson Ross & Bryan McKay, *Self-Mutilation*, p. 3.

providing an iconography of domesticity that is heightened by her staging of the photographs within confined spaces. The liminal setting of figs. 3.1 and 3.2 underneath the eaves of a house is replaced in the later images by a very shallow space against an interior wall. Seated on a wooden stool in *Horizontale*, and a similarly ordinary chair in fig. 3.13, these emblems of domestic furnishing reappear in figs. 3.17 and 3.18 in the details of the rough sketch pinned up behind her body. Woodman's inclusion of her own hand-drawn image makes clear the way in which she had artfully created this explicitly domestic backdrop, as she re-described the blank wall of her studio as a homely interior. A sense of intimacy and privacy is further engendered through Woodman's manipulation of the medium: the tiny scale of these photographs (none of which was enlarged from their 6 cm by 6 cm negative to much more than 20 cm square) combined with the close-up view produces a shallow and enclosed space, one which demands close scrutiny. If viewed on a gallery wall, the photographs would demand the mobilization of the viewing body moving up close to scrutinize each shot. By peering into the tiny photographic window, the spectator becomes implicated in a moment of voyeuristic viewing, as if caught looking in on the private scene of metaphoric cutting.

Actual self-cutting, meticulous in its attention to detail, depends on the repetitive infliction of "superficial, delicate, carefully designed incisions", a process which evokes the precision of sewing or embroidery, and the visualisation of an intricately worked end result.<sup>44</sup> The analogy of stitching was used by one self-cutter, who proudly described her own arms as "patchwork quilts", the ridges of scar tissue and angry wounds like lines of decorative stitching against the rest of her unmarked flesh.<sup>45</sup> As if pieced together, this idea of "quilted flesh" dramatises the importance of the scar, as it persists on the skin as the remainder of the body's opening, an indexical trace of the transgression of the borders of the body.<sup>46</sup> A marker of this moment, the scar also seems to record the duration of the act: apparent only after the event, once the cut has healed, the scar marks the end of the cutting scene as *process*. This sense of duration is necessary for the fulfillment of the highly ritualised act, as it must be carried out in the correct order, and is dependent upon the observation of certain rules within a specific and premeditated temporal framework. Carefully planned and prepared, the self-cutter's instruments are cleaned and often sterilised, before being laid out as if for a

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<sup>44</sup> Pao, 'The Syndrome of Delicate Self-Cutting', p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Strong, *A Bright Red Scream*, p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



surgical procedure. Characterised by a build-up of psychic tension, the moments prior to the cut are steeped in anxiety, a building tension which is relieved in the instant of the searing cut, followed by another moment of anticipation, the suspenseful wait for the blood to appear. Starting to flow, it runs red over the skin, soothing the surface in a binding bath of warm liquid.<sup>47</sup> Once dried, the wound is re-bathed in water, carefully dried, and bound up with bandages to heal.

Perhaps more than the craft practice of sewing, this ritualised scene resonates with the process of photography as a craft. Practiced in the intimate space of the darkroom, an enclosed space in which chemicals are mixed according to a strict recipe, liquids heated and cooled and carefully measured, the photographic process brings to mind a domestic language of cookery. Like cooking, and like the act of cutting, photography is itself dependent on the observation of rules and strict order, and the process of the photograph's development is also contained within a strict temporal framework which is characterised by moments of suspense and anticipation, of waiting and development. Once sliced from the world in the dark reproductive space deep within the camera's chamber, the negative itself is then cut from its reel, bathed in chemicals, and carefully rinsed and dried. In the enclosed intimacy of the darkroom, individual shots are sliced from the roll of film, compressed in the negative holder, and projected onto the light-sensitive surface of the printing paper. Chemicals are measured and diluted, warmed or cooled to reach the correct temperature, and carefully poured out to fill a bathing tray, into which the paper is placed. There is a moment of anticipation and suspense as the projected light begins to emerge as a positive image on the surface of the paper — and then, the image is fixed, the print is bathed under running water and pegged out by its corners to dry.

Is it possible to read Woodman's pegged body not only as a laundered cloth, but as a photographic skin, echoing the way in which the developed print is pegged out to drip dry? Symbolic of that printed image, the end result of the photographic process, could it be invested with the same reparative function characterised by the scar? In her project of self-representation, it is perhaps possible that Woodman used her own image as some sort of binding skin, a reparative membrane whose shiny surface re-seals and re-

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<sup>47</sup> See John Kafka, 'The Body as Transitional Object: A Psychoanalytic Study of a Self-Mutilating Patient', *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 42 (1969). Kafka notes that the blood here functions as a Winnicottian transitional object.

constitutes a disparate subjectivity, one felt to be subjected to fragmentation in the act of photographic objectification.

As Favazza notes, the act of self-cutting serves a paradoxical function. Rather than opening up a “portal through which the inner self and outer world might flow into each other”, the cut has the converse effect, working to re-fortify the body’s boundaries.<sup>48</sup> The process is experienced as a kind of “self-surgery” which eases disrupted psychic functioning.<sup>49</sup> By exaggerating the sensation felt on the skin, cutting seems to have the effect of making the subject more aware of a sense of self, a sudden realisation of selfhood which is provoked by the over-stimulation of the body’s own sensitive boundaries. According to psychoanalyst John Kafka, the pain of the cut produces in the self-cutter the “exquisite border experience” of suddenly coming alive, the stimulation of the epidermal nerve endings provoking a re-unification of a disparate subject in an act of self-binding which is then reinforced by the final “voluptuous bath” of blood as its warm flow re-sculpts the body’s schema.<sup>50</sup> Particularly effective in those instances of psychic breakdown described as ‘depersonalization’ or ‘dissociation’, the act of cutting seems to enable the subject to gain a firmer hold on their own subjectivity, as it promotes the coincidence of the self with the notion of the bodily schema.<sup>51</sup> Having lost a perceptual grasp of their environment, as if “stepping out” of themselves via a breakdown in their “skin-self border”, the dissociated subject experiences their own dislocation and self-displacement.<sup>52</sup>

The comforting sense of a unified self sought by the dissociated subject in the act of cutting is echoed in James Elkins’ description of the way in which the skin is experienced as the binding surface through which such a sense of self is defined. The skin’s sensitive surface functions as a perceptive field on which stimulation—either pleasurable or painful, or in the hazy area between the two—works to unify and contain the subject, in a process of ‘focusing’ through which the subjectivity becomes perfectly individuated from the surrounding environment. As Elkins puts it, the skin is like the “thin plane of perfect focus in an optical system: everything beyond it (outside the body,

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<sup>48</sup> Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege*, p. 123.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>50</sup> Kafka, ‘The Body as Transitional Object’, p. 209.

<sup>51</sup> See Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege*; also, Frank Miller & Edmund A. Bashkin, ‘Depersonalisation and Self Mutilation’, *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 43 (1974).

<sup>52</sup> Strong, *A Bright Red Scream*, p. 6; Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege*, p. 123.



in the world) and everything in front of it (in the body, in the more-or-less hidden insides) is blurred”.<sup>53</sup> A fragile and easily damaged membrane which only just preserves the “perfect focus” desirable for the ongoing maintenance of subjectivity, the skin is imagined to contain both the body’s messy insides, and a psychically produced sense of self.

By describing the skin and the effects of pain on its surface as an ‘optical system’ of perfect focus and graduating levels of blurred and hazy indistinction, Elkins makes a covert reference to the mechanisms of the photographic medium. As if twisting the barrels of the lens to achieve a camera’s correct or ideal level of focus, the stimulation of the skin is the means through which a sense of self is created, as if pulling together disparate elements to carve out a unified self from a field of overall blur. Only when this blur has been brought into sharp precision, when each doubled or overlapping outline fits in place to create a distinct and singular contour, is perfect focus achieved. By describing that moment just prior to the cutting action of the shutter’s ‘click’, and the end result of the wound carved into the skin of the ‘blurred’ and diffuse dissociated subject, the idea of ‘self-focusing’ recalls the moment of framing which Woodman’s imagery of suggested pain stages.

By refusing to depict an actual cut, Woodman’s imagery endlessly re-plays that moment *just prior* to the act of photographic cutting, dramatizing the process of photographic framing, as it ‘focuses’ the image, condensing the image’s detail from the infinite space off-frame. Within the temporal framework of self-cutting, this instant of careful planning and preparation aligns with the tense moments leading up to the slicing of the blade through the skin. Without the possibility of ever cutting, the binding function of subsequent healing is precluded: the suspension of this anxious moment fixes the fractured subject within the eternal duration of the dissociative episode. Jacob Arlow elucidates this fracturing as a split between the “function of immediate experiencing from the function of self observation”, a dissociation of the “participating” self and the “observing” self, provoking a state in which “one self appears to be standing off at a distance in a detached and relatively objective manner observing another representation

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<sup>53</sup> Elkins, *Pictures of the Body*, p. 36.

of the self in action”.<sup>54</sup> Identifying more with the observing faction, the split subject feels him or herself more estranged from the participating self, experienced as an object, which Kafka describes as a “not-me skin” shed from the body.<sup>55</sup>

This bisection of subjectivity into (disembodied) observer and embodied (but estranged) object alludes to the process of objectification inherent in the process of photographic self-portraiture, dramatising the conflict between the authorial I/eye behind the camera, and the objectified body laid bare under its gaze. This process of depersonalisation is exaggerated by Woodman as she hides her face, or cuts off her head, and is further enhanced by the physicality of the bodily displacement necessary to the act of self-imaging. It is not known if she was alone when she took these particular photographs; perhaps Sloan Rankin was there to frame the shot or trip the shutter as she often was. Or perhaps Woodman marked the position of her body against the sketching paper taped to the wall, went behind the camera to look through the viewfinder, set the timer and took up her place once more. Her usual practice of using a timer locates her photographic action within a finite temporal framework, the whirring of the motor ticking off the seconds before the shutter snapped closed, investing the resultant image with a heightened sense of tense presentiment, and a quality of movement or performative action. By staging a process, Woodman’s bodily displacement during this anxious countdown seems to predict the moment of the photographic cut. As if re-enacting that moment of self-objectification, Woodman plays out the experience of self-loss Roland Barthes described as the feeling of being “neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object” in a perpetual moment of subtle transition.<sup>56</sup>

Her skin literally under tension, the pressure of the glass corner against Woodman’s flesh in fig. 3.17 articulates the possibility of actual cutting, the slicing action of the sharp edge through the skin’s soft surface, encouraging an anxious response that might provoke an instant of inter-subjective identification in the viewing subject. The possibility of this exchange is heightened by her own explicit depersonalisation, and through her inclusion of the plate of glass that functions as a specular surface. As if a

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<sup>54</sup> Jacob A. Arlow, ‘Depersonalization and Derealization,’ in Rudolph Lowenstein, Lottie Newman, Max Schur & Albert Solnit (eds), *Psychoanalysis – A General Psychology* (New York: International Universities Press, 1966), p. 456.

<sup>55</sup> Kafka, ‘The Body as Transitional Object’, p. 212.

<sup>56</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 14.



mirror, the glassy surface offers a fantasy space of reflection and identification, as the spectator takes up Woodman's evacuated space behind her camera in the viewing moment.<sup>57</sup>

Whilst this staged encounter might expose the instability of the categories of self and other, and the reciprocity through which subjectivity is negotiated, Woodman's photographic displacements operate within a markedly solipsistic economy.<sup>58</sup> Within the closed-circuit of photographic self-portraiture, it is the inherent instability of the subject that is suggested. As the invisible subject behind the camera, Woodman haunts the space just out of the frame. But she is also the object under the camera's flattening gaze, and by casting off her own image, Woodman proclaims her own self-objectification, in so doing suggesting the futility of any project of self-representation. Over-spilling the glass frame in fig. 3.17, the swell of her flesh against its sharp edges perhaps betrays a desire to re-embody this evacuated object-skin. Manipulating the glass against her body as if a plate used in the production of a monotype print, here intimately glued to her skin, Woodman elaborates the photograph's indexical connection to the body. The translucent and rectilinear pane of glass pressed against her skin becomes a photograph within a photograph, as it mimics in reduced format the appearance of the finished print. Photographic skin against body-skin, Woodman's imagery produces a spectacle of the index, and could be interpreted as evidence of the artist's engagement with American art practice of the period, in which photography and the body were utilised in order to probe and question the reality of the promise of such an intimate connection to the material world.<sup>59</sup>

Symbolic of the 'connective tissue' which the photograph itself embodies, the pressure of the cold glass against warm skin glorifies the terms of the medium's indexicality, whilst also always pointing out a fundamental disparity.<sup>60</sup> As Amelia Jones notes, the

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<sup>57</sup> By offering this space of encounter, Woodman's photography could operate within what Amelia Jones outlines as an important strategy of post-modernist projects of self-representation. For Jones, the value of the body-related performance and photography of the 1970s lies in the way it "*enacts or performs or instantiates* the embodiment and intertwining of self and other" in a display of reciprocity, in which the boundaries of self and other are destabilized. See Amelia Jones, *Body Art*, p. 38.

<sup>58</sup> It is in this sense that self-cutting diverts from a Deleuzian mapping of masochism, which demands the involvement of two 'actors' (although it is actually always predicated on the desires of the 'victim' subject, and the evacuation of the subjectivity of the 'aggressor'). See Deleuze, *Sacher-Masoch*.

<sup>59</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Part 1', *October* 3 (Spring 1977), reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 206; and 'Notes on the Index: Part 2', *October* 4 (Fall 1977).

<sup>60</sup> Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Part 2', p. 60.

dramatisation of the index serves to expose its own spurious claim to truth, its proof of presence merely highlighting absence, as it “calls out the supplementarity of the body and the subject” in the futility of its apparent direction of attention to an original gesture.<sup>61</sup> Severing her own image from any link to the ‘reality’ of her subjectivity, Woodman’s metaphoric articulation of cutting re-stages the photographic moment just prior to the click of the shutter. Elaborating the photographic act as one in which her body is brutally cropped and her subjectivity subtly elided, the suggested metaphor of cutting echoes the splitting and dislocation of the subject under the camera’s gaze. As if caught between the position of dissociated observer and objectified self, Woodman’s photograph functions as an intermediary surface on which her cast-off, objectified self-image is traced. Each of Woodman’s self-representations announces the fact of her own absence, the artist’s own relegation to the fantasy space just off-frame, as if to say that this cast-off image-skin is always, somehow, ‘not-me.’<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Jones, *Body Art*, p. 38.

<sup>62</sup> A version of this chapter was published as ‘Delicate cutting: Francesca Woodman’s articulation of the photographic *coupe*’ in *Object, Graduate Research and Reviews in the History of Art and Visual Culture* (London: History of Art Department, UCL, 2002).



## 4

## A Disappearing Act

Within the archive of some five or six hundred photographs that Francesca Woodman produced between 1972 and her death in 1981, there is a small book containing just five shots, loosely bound together with a red ribbon. Each photograph has been mounted on pale card in landscape format, and enclosed within a card cover which bears the artist's hand-written title of *Portrait of a Reputation* (figs. 4.1-4.5).<sup>1</sup> Made sometime between 1975 and 1979 whilst studying at RISD, this series is one of a number of artist's books that Woodman produced during her short career. But as this is the only sequence collected and bound by the artist herself in which she used herself as her only model, Woodman's act of sustained self-representation here marks the set as unique.

At first glance, Woodman's photographic project as a whole seems to be one of self-portrayal, so often did she use herself as the primary subject of her work. But on closer inspection, Woodman's project of self-representation is habitually subverted by her attempts to evade photographic capture. By cropping or hiding her face, obscuring herself in deep shadow or hazy blurs of light, or substituting her own body with those of female models (many of whom seem chosen for their resemblance to Woodman herself), the artist frequently slips from view.<sup>2</sup>

In the *Portrait of a Reputation* series, it is not long before Woodman pulls a familiar disappearing act. Fully clothed in the first photograph (fig. 4.1), Woodman stands with

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to George and Betty Woodman for making it possible for me to study this unpublished book, which due to its fragility has been scanned into digital format. A version of this chapter will appear as 'A Disappearing Act: Francesca Woodman's *Portrait of a Reputation* in *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2004) (in press).

<sup>2</sup> Sloan Rankin suggested that to some extent Woodman's recurring self-imaging may have been instigated by a certain egotism, symptomatic of a narcissistic enjoyment in her own youthful body. But when she asked Woodman why she so often photographed herself, Woodman offered a more practical motivation: "It's a matter of convenience, I'm always available." Woodman's explanation goes some way to unhitch her photographic project from any charge of simple narcissism, and distances her role as artistic producer from a body of work that has been read as intensely personal and diaristic, her imagery of self confined within the strictures of a solipsistic enterprise. As a prolific and talented writer, the personal journal form was no doubt important for Woodman, as she often scrawled artfully worded messages onto the backs of her photographs: however, I argue that Woodman was also concerned with wider issues of subjectivity, in technique, and in formal considerations of the medium, a set of problems which are all addressed in the series under discussion in this chapter. See Sloan Rankin's essay 'Francesca Woodman: Voyeurism among Friends' in Gerard Malanga (ed.), *Scopophilia, The Love of Looking* (New York: Alfred van der Marck Editions, 1985); and her essay 'Peach Mumble-Ideas Cooking' in Hervé Chandès (ed.), *Francesca Woodman* (Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain



her right hand clad in a long black glove held hand over heart. Her gaze meets the camera's eye, her face visible although her head is just clipped by the top edge of the frame. In the second shot, her face is half-hidden, as it has been obscured by a band of deep shadow (fig. 4.2). Whilst it is unclear if the strange effect has been produced through double exposure or a manipulation at the printing stage, Woodman's face appears as if bisected, under-exposed in places whilst a light wedge at the top reveals more of her features. Again she wears the black glove, but now presses it against the naked skin of her breast as her dress hangs around her waist. Her face reappears in the third shot to reveal a steady gaze (fig. 4.3). No longer wearing the glove, her arms are pressed against the wall behind her in a gesture of surrender to the camera, revealing her naked torso onto which she has traced the outline of the arm, drawn around its form in thick black paint, as if the black glove had left its mark. Her forearms and hands seem dirty and inky, prefiguring the way in which in the fourth image she has pressed them onto her body (fig. 4.4). And on the final page, Woodman's vanishing act is complete, her body seemingly sunk into the plaster, leaving a residual trace of her presence as an inky handprint on the studio wall (fig. 4.5).

The exaggerated gestures with which Woodman holds up her gloved and paint-smeared hands immediately recall the celebrated image of Meret Oppenheim posing next to an etching press (fig. 4.6). Taken by Man Ray in 1933, a version of the image was published in the pages of the journal *Minotaure* in 1934 as an example of *Érotique Voilée*, and the photograph depicts Oppenheim in an almost weary gesture as she holds up one inked-up hand to her forehead. As if imprinting her own limb onto the surface of the image, or even replacing its black and white photographic 'skin' with her own, Oppenheim's gesture of self-printing conflates the skin of the female body and the photograph's surface, as her own body becomes the medium of representation.<sup>3</sup>

This familiar image is just one from Man Ray's original set of ten or so photographs. By replacing this shot within that set, it becomes apparent how Man Ray's series describes a process of image-making, through a reference to the etching medium. Set in the studio of Louis Marcoussis, Man Ray's photographs stage a relationship between the clothed figure of Marcoussis and the naked Oppenheim, as the two figures pose next

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& Zurich-Berlin-New York: Scalo, 1998). For an example of an essay which interprets Woodman's work as diaristic, see Jen Budney's catalogue essay in *Francesca Woodman* (Modena: Galleria Civica, 1996).



to an etching press, as if acting out the way in which the intaglio print is produced. Two photographs show the initial stages of the etching process, as Marcoussis holds Oppenheim's hand in his own (figs. 4.7 and 4.8). Carefully wiping her skin with a rag, Marcoussis' action apes the way in which grease and dirt is removed from the surface of the etching plate so that the ink might fully adhere to its grooved surface. As if re-enacting that preparatory stage in the printmaking process prior to the one suggested by Oppenheim's gesture in *Érotique Voilée* (fig. 4.6), the two actors' concentrated gazes suggest a moment of painstaking care as Oppenheim's hand is made ready for inking-up. The suggested narrative and temporal progression of the series is developed by a further photograph, in which Oppenheim appears with her hand now blackened with ink and ready for printing (fig. 4.9). Oppenheim leans into the frame, laying her arm onto the blanket-covered bed of the press. Inky side up, it takes the place of the etching plate as a substitute surface, the creases and crevices of her skin like the acid-etched fissures which retain the sticky printing ink.

Woodman uses her own body as a similar tool of printmaking in the *Portrait of a Reputation* series. It is highly probable that Woodman had seen Man Ray's series, unlikely that she would not have been familiar with the photograph that appeared in *Minotaure*, so similar are some of the poses she strikes with her own body. The visual resonances seem obvious: Woodman's nakedness bar the dark ring of a necklace in the third and fourth shots apes Oppenheim's artful nudity, and the long black glove she wears seems to both re-iterate Oppenheim's original gesture whilst also reconfiguring the surface of the inked-up skin as it concealed in the depths of the glove's soft interior.

But in Woodman's series, she is both photographer and her own model, in a self-contained act that contrasts with the dual roles staged in Man Ray's photographs. Oppenheim's gesture of self-printing is acted out as part of the ambiguous narrative of threatened violence and tender care which is played out over the series. In another shot, (fig. 4.10), Marcoussis pushes Oppenheim down onto the bed of the press in an act of implied sexual aggression. Oppenheim's face is glimpsed behind the wheel of the handle, as if trapped behind the bars of the machine's metal structure. The dark curves of the handle fragment her body into a number of parts, whilst the alarmed expression on her face is perfectly framed by the interlocking lines of the press. Marcoussis holds

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<sup>3</sup> See David Lomas' recent description of this photograph in Jennifer Mundy (ed.), *Surrealism, Desire*



Oppenheim's arms behind her back, wearing a menacing expression on his own face as he appears to coerce Oppenheim's body as if to crush her between the rollers of the press. In this staged scenario, Marcoussis becomes the protagonist in a melodramatic narrative that is heightened by both figures' exaggerated facial expressions, and the looming shadows tracking across the series.

Marcoussis' role as aggressor contrasts with the passive role Oppenheim herself takes on, and the interaction of the two 'actors' dramatises the authoritarian role of the unseen photographer directing the action off-frame. Man Ray's directorial role is denoted within the frame by the male presence of Marcoussis, whose elaborate dress exaggerates the masculinity of his character. Formally suited, at times wearing a false beard and anachronistic bowler hat (figs. 4.7 and 4.8), Marcoussis' slightly comical costume is suggestive of an over-played masculinity, worn to heighten the carefully contrived staging of stereotypical gender roles. By acting the parts of the passive and naked model and the overly masculine 'creator' of the image, Oppenheim and Marcoussis work together to act out a narrative in which their traditional gender positions become embroiled within the scene of printmaking.

The ambiguous violence which is related to the act of representation is echoed by the way in which parts of Oppenheim's body become occluded in some of the shots of the series. Man Ray's manipulation of the photographic technique of cropping, displayed in the use of pencil marks on a number of his prints, shows the way in which he intended the final prints to fragment and dismember Oppenheim's body. For example, in the uncropped photograph of Oppenheim standing against the wall with an outstretched arm (fig. 4.11), the sharp corner of the press cuts across her pubis in a castrative thrust which casts a deep shadow over the lower half of her body, obscuring her legs in a way that is echoed by the shading of her right arm. This dismembering 'cut' is realised in the cropped version, (although shifted onto her left arm), as Oppenheim's image has been reduced to just one disembodied outstretched limb (fig. 4.12). Cropped by the edge of the final print, the black ink on her arm repeats this act of 'dismemberment', and is echoed by the curve of the press's wheel as it cuts through the corner of the image. Although its sticky shine is testament to its own materiality, the ink reconfigures Oppenheim's body as a negative area of absence.



Although the possibility of a collaborative relationship between Man Ray and his 'actors' might in some way upset the traditional scene of artistic representation enacted over the units of his series, the naked skin of the female body unavoidably remains the surface through which the male artist's marks are reproduced. In Woodman's series, by using her own body as both the tool and the support for the resultant image, the act of self-printing collapses the strict binary of artistic agent and passive model. Whilst Marcoussis' masculine presence draws attention to the male photographer's unseen presence, Woodman's act of disappearance draws attention to her own momentary evacuation of that place behind the lens. Staging scenes in which her presence is necessarily shifting, Woodman's series re-situates the drama of photographic manipulation onto herself. Within a body of work in which her own body is a recurring subject, Woodman returned again and again to the ways in which her camera worked to displace any 'essence' of identity. Manipulating light to achieve effects of blurring and deep fragmenting shadow, and taking advantage of the camera's ability to crop and frame the body, Woodman exploited a photographic language of violence, as she explored the medium's proclivity for excising subjectivity from the world.<sup>4</sup>

In the *Portrait of a Reputation*, Woodman stages this photographic process not in one single shot, but in a linked series, whose sequential format imbues her work with a performative element that resonates with contemporaneous 1970s art practice. Evidenced in performance-related photography and body art, Rosalind Krauss characterised much American art practice of the period as problematising issues of artistic identity and subjectivity. By using the body and photography as artistic media predicated on an indexical link to 'reality', the terms of this claim to "total self-presence" were at once celebrated and destabilised.<sup>5</sup> Whilst offering a fantasy of such presence, both photography and performative body art instead tend to underline the fallacy of such a claim, as both can only ever record the inherent displacement of the originary gesture.

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<sup>4</sup> See Philippe Dubois' discussion of the photographic *coupe* in *L'Acte Photographique et Autre Essais* (Brussels: Labor, 1990), p. 153. I have explored Woodman's manipulation of cropping as emblematic of the 'violence' acted out on the subject in the third chapter of this thesis.

<sup>5</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Part 1', *October*, 3, Spring 1977, reprinted in Rosalind Krauss *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1985), p. 206.

Although thoroughly embedded within this performative art world context, Woodman's practice is primarily photographic. Made at a time when, as Krauss suggests, artists were addressing the "explicit terms of the index", Woodman's book explored the limits of the photographic medium.<sup>6</sup> I want to suggest that in the *Portrait of a Reputation* series, Woodman used the book's sequential format as a space to 'act out' the ways in which the photograph fails to offer up the 'reality' of artistic presence. Upsetting the photograph's seductive promise of indexical proximity, Woodman performed a bodily displacement that re-stages the total 'self-absence' precipitated in the act of photographic self-representation, a process of disappearance reflected in the way her body gradually slips out of sight.

But in *Portrait of a Reputation*, all is not lost, for Woodman leaves a trace of herself in the imprints of her hand on the wall of her studio in the final shot. They bear witness to the way in which she pressed her painted hand against her body to produce the fourth image from the series. Here, her smudgy imprints have a painterly quality which invokes the gestural *Anthropometries* Yves Klein made in the 1960s by using his female models as 'living paintbrushes'. Taking their naked bodies as the tools of the male artist's mono-print paintings, Klein was able to solve what he termed the "problem of detachment".<sup>7</sup> As the detached director to the events in which his models imprinted their paint-covered skin onto the canvas supports, Klein was able to avoid getting his own hands dirty in the messy business of painterly representation.<sup>8</sup>

Like Klein, Woodman uses naked female skin as the medium of representation, but unlike Klein, her own hands are definitely dirtied here. But a similar sense of detachment is suggested by Woodman's figuration of her handprints, each of which records the trace of a displaced gesture. Just as her glove displaces the touch of her

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<sup>6</sup> Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Part 1' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, p. 206.

<sup>7</sup> See Yves Klein's 'The Chelsea Hotel Manifesto' of 1961, reprinted in Gilbert Pertein and Bruno Cora, *Yves Klein, Long Live the Immaterial!* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000), p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> As Amelia Jones has shown, Klein's act of distancing himself from the means of artistic production is a strategy which "ironicizes the mythology of the action painting hero thrusting his body across the canvas on the floor". Whilst destabilizing the phallic authority invested within the transcendent (masculine) figure of modernism, this action cannot fail to simultaneously shore up its power. An ambivalent parody of masculinity staged through the performance of an exaggerated 'hyper-masculinity', Klein's act ultimately fails to open up the codes of modernist art, in which the female body remains that surface imprinted with the traces of masculine artistic authority. Within these codes, Woodman's use of her own naked body could be interpreted as similarly retrogressive or conservative, re-inscribing the body of the artist within these parameters, as her body and skin remains the passive bearer of images. See Amelia Jones, 'Dis/playing the phallus: male artists perform their masculinities', *Art History*, vol. 17, no. 4 (December 1994), p. 562.



hand, so the imprint, and its subsequent photographic recording, functions as a similar marker of deferred presence. Whilst Klein used his models' bodies as the 'negative' stage of the performative action through which his own presence – his own 'hand' – was displaced, Woodman fixes the stage of the unfulfilled negative trace on her own image.

Drawing attention to her staged absence, Woodman's handprints re-iterate a sense of loss, as they mark her studio wall with the indelible trace of codified femininity.<sup>9</sup> Looking at the placement of the hand-prints on her body in the fourth photograph of the series – both of which were made with her right hand, pressed once over her left breast, once over her pubic triangle – it becomes obvious that her body is marked with an impossible rehearsal of the 'Venus Pudica' pose. An instantly recognisable imprint of culturally marked femininity, the pose defines the female body through reference to the visible elements of her sexuality. Now endemic, the historical repetition of the nude's gesture of "indexing her pubis" has undergone a process of naturalisation through which it has become seemingly transparent.<sup>10</sup> By appropriating the pose, Woodman locates her own self-representation within the history of Western aesthetics, a system of representation in which Woman is figured in terms of her (highly codified and debased) sexuality.<sup>11</sup>

By coercing the spectatorial subject into the position of voyeur to her performance of a shameful nudity, Woodman's pose establishes a narrative of desiring looking, a narrative thread which is drawn out through the sequential format of the book. Gradually revealing more and more of her body, Woodman performs a kind of striptease for the camera: but when finally naked in the fourth photograph, visual access to her sexuality is denied, as her pubis is obscured by the smudgy imprint of her hand. Figured as absence, the trace of Woodman's own hand conceals her female 'lack' in a paralipsistic gesture, functioning like a painterly fig-leaf which hides her sex.

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps it is possible to interpret Woodman's gestures here within the terms Amelia Jones describes in relation to Klein: Woodman's problematic conflation of agency and passivity could then be read as a similarly strategic display of over-exaggerated gender codes, a kind of 'hyper-femininity' performed in order to undo its rigid codes. See Jones, 'Dis/Playing the phallus'.

<sup>10</sup> See Nanette Salomon, 'The Venus Pudica: uncovering art history's 'hidden agendas' and pernicious pedigrees', in Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts, Feminist Readings* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent discussion of the meaning of the figure of Venus in art historical representation, see Caroline Arscott and Katie Scott (eds), *Manifestations of Venus, Art and Sexuality*, (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).



Displacing the desiring gaze, the pose implicates the viewer within a narrative in which they “*cannot not* think about her pubis”.<sup>12</sup> As Roland Barthes points out, the allure of the strip-tease lies precisely in its promise of nakedness that is at once reassuringly denied, as the female body remains sexualised (and so an available surface for the projection of desire) only when partially clothed.<sup>13</sup> Woodman uses her handprints to clothe her body in art historical convention, constructing herself as artfully ‘nude’. Deeply black, her paint-smudged skin retains the trace of the long glove she discarded after the second shot. One of the ‘classic’ props of strip-tease, the glove is then replaced by a concealing shadow through which Woodman’s unveiled female body becomes fetishised, “more remote” as it is displaced from a desiring gaze.<sup>14</sup>

The way in which Woodman exploited the glove’s fetishistic connotations has been noted in Susan Rubin Suleiman’s discussion of one of the artist’s relatively well-known photographs. In *Horizontale*, (fig. 4.13) from 1976 to 1977, Woodman photographed herself cropped at the waist, with her legs sprawling across the frame and her left big toe nudging the bottom corner. Bound tightly by the shiny tape tied neatly at her ankle, the flesh of Woodman’s legs bulges around the ligatures, whilst with her right hand she holds a woollen glove over her sex.<sup>15</sup> Staging an encounter between Woodman and her Surrealist ‘forefathers’, Suleiman posits Woodman’s glove in an inter-generational dialogue with the anonymous photograph of the bronze glove included by André Breton in the pages of *Nadja* (fig. 4.14). No longer that “slithery, luxurious affair”, Woodman’s glove is humble, domestic, and the staged fetishising of her own ‘lack’ is destabilised through a strategy of humour.<sup>16</sup> A witty rejoinder to a Surrealist joke, the

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<sup>12</sup> Salomon, ‘The Venus Pudica’, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> See Roland Barthes’ essay ‘Striptease’ reprinted in *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 84 (selected and translated from the French *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957, translated by Jonathan Cape 1972)).

<sup>14</sup> Barthes, ‘Striptease’, p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> This photograph is addressed at length in the third chapter of this thesis in relation to a theme of self-mutilation and the staging of the body under duress that recurs within Woodman’s practice.

<sup>16</sup> André Breton, *Nadja*, (trans. Richard Howard) (New York: Grove Press, 1960) (originally published in French in 1928). In his discussion of the bronze glove in Breton’s text, Hal Foster notes how *Nadja*’s own drawing of another glove appears later in the text, as a kind of fetishistic repetition of the first image; see *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1993), p. 33. Whilst *Nadja*’s glove does repeat the trope, it is also interesting that her drawing seems to figure the original image in reverse: her drawing shows a white glove on a black background, as if the bronze glove’s negative imprint traced through the pressure of the pages of the book, the inverted relationship of negative and positive conjuring a language of photography.



ordinariness of Woodman's woolly glove mocks the construction of the feminine as the 'hole' to be always obscured.<sup>17</sup>

George Woodman, Francesca's father, could not remember if he first gave her a copy of Breton's *Nadja*, or if it happened the other way around, but it undoubtedly remained a favourite text for her, and its theme of encounter and loss recurs within her work.<sup>18</sup> But there is something about the glove itself that seems to have intrigued Woodman, something about the ambiguous way it both conceals and reveals the body, as it simultaneously doubles and displaces her own hand. Appearing again and again as an element of costume in conjunction with her own naked body, or that of a female friend or model, the frequency with which Woodman returned to this prop suggests that it should be interpreted not only as evidence of her habit of collecting old clothing, or her own self-consciously anachronistic style of dress, but symbolic of something more.<sup>19</sup> Invariably feminine—often long and slinky, or woollen and homely—Woodman's gloves evoke feminised glamour or quotidian domesticity rather than the protective tools of manual labour. Invested with a feminine quality here, Woodman's glove echoes the way in which the trope appears within Surrealist representation as both sexual fetish-object, and the marker of a haunting presence. Constructing her own self-image within a Surrealist lexicon of feminine absence, Woodman's photographs tell a tale of self-displacement, of a female subjectivity absented from the frame of representation.

José Pierre described the glove's symbolic importance within the history of Surrealist imagery in the pages of the journal *Le Surrealisme, même* in 1957.<sup>20</sup> Noting the way in which it is used as a fetishistic prop which both conceals and heightens the nudity of the female body in the 1945 film *Gilda*, Pierre proceeded to back track through time, as if to unearth the roots of the glove's rich associations.<sup>21</sup> Tracing the symbol's fetishistic

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<sup>17</sup> See Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance, Some Contemporary Women Artists and the Historical Avant-Garde' in Whitney Chadwick (ed.), *Mirror Images – Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 146.

<sup>18</sup> George Woodman, in conversation with the author (New York, April 2002).

<sup>19</sup> In conversation (New York, April 2001), George Woodman noted how as a teenager Francesca obsessively collected second-hand clothing from thrift stores both in the US, and during trips to London, and hoarded them to form the wardrobe from which her self-consciously eccentric and anachronistic style of dress was put together.

<sup>20</sup> José Pierre, 'Le Gant et son rôle dans l'oeuvre de Klinger et de Chirico', *Le Surrealisme, même*, no. 1 (1957).

<sup>21</sup> In describing the relationship of the glove to female sexuality Pierre states 'montrer ses mains nues, c'est montrer son sexe' ('Le Gant', p. 132). Describing Rita Hayworth's role in the film *Gilda*, Pierre

connotations through history, Pierre drew on Octave Uzanne's late nineteenth century essay entitled *l'Ombrelle, le Gant – le Manchon*, a text that celebrates the glove's relationship to femininity.<sup>22</sup> A delightful "feminine toy", the glove is described by Uzanne as both an element of feminine adornment and as a prop in elaborate systems of etiquette which protect modesty and preserve decorum, as it covers the delicate skin of the female body.<sup>23</sup> Used in coy flirtation, the glove also had a role in games of seduction, a woman dropping her glove serving as an invitation for a male suitor to pick both it, and her, up.<sup>24</sup>

But the glove's 'profound femininity' also intimates a relationship with the female body itself.<sup>25</sup> Whilst the vaginal connotations of the glove's soft and hidden interior are obvious, its relationship to the body is heightened by an insistence on fine quality. The leather's ideally soft texture and pale hue relate it to the surface of the (Western, white) female body, which it covers in skin-tight proximity, a just-displaced second skin. Ostensibly decorous, the scenting of the leather—with musk, civet, or ambergris—further sexualised the glove, and imbued it with its fetishistic potential.<sup>26</sup> This capacity is heightened by Uzanne's own fetishising language, as he described gloves as "long sheaths of buck skin which imprison to-day so deliciously the plump arms up to and beyond the laughing dimples of the elbows of our coquette of taste".<sup>27</sup> Uzanne's libidinous description celebrates the veiled nineteenth century body, hidden and sheathed, fetishised and phallicised, by displacing attention onto the skin-surface of the glove itself, and in so doing drawing attention away from that which lay 'beyond'.

But Pierre picked up on the more subtle story of feminine absence that was played out visually in a series of ten etchings made by Max Klinger between 1878 and 1881, a sequence roughly contemporaneous with Uzanne's extended celebration of the feminine prop of the glove. Entitled *Paraphrase über den Fund eines Handschuhes* (Paraphrase

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quotes the words of one contemporary critic, who stated that 'Quand elle a ôté le premier gant, elle a l'air d'être à moitié nue et, quand elle enlève le second....' (p. 132). The author's description seem to neatly express the glove's role as a prop through which strip-tease is characterised by anticipation, the displacement of the gaze and the endlessly deferred promise of revelation.

<sup>22</sup> Octave Uzanne, *L'Ombrelle, le Gant, le Manchon* (Paris: A. Quantin, 1883); this book was published in English in the same year as *The Sunshade, The Glove, The Muff* (London: J. C. Nimmo, 1883) (no translator given).

<sup>23</sup> Uzanne, *The Sunshade, The Glove, The Muff*, p. ii.

<sup>24</sup> See Fanche Le Reste, *Le Gant* (Paris: Jacques Damase, 1984).

<sup>25</sup> Uzanne, *The Sunshade, The Glove, The Muff*, p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> Le Reste, *Le Gant*, pp. 36-37.



on the Finding of a Glove), the cycle narrates the adventures of a glove dropped by an 'exotic' Brazilian woman at an ice rink, as the invitation to an amorous encounter (see fig. 4.15 and 4.16, *Handlung (Action)* and *Ruhe (Repose)*). Picking up the glove, but failing to follow up on the woman's invitation, Klinger's male narrator, (himself aged twenty-four), becomes obsessed with her abandoned accessory as it becomes invested with progressively acute states of psychic unease, culminating in a nightmare of unfulfilled desire.<sup>28</sup>

An icon of sublimated sexuality, Klinger's glove functions as a proto-Freudian elaboration of the mechanisms of fetishistic desire, and is described by Donald Kuspit as the "grandfather" of the modern fetish object appropriated within Surrealist imagery as a symbol of feminine lack.<sup>29</sup> But Pierre offers a more suggestive reading, as he invokes a femininity constructed within a paradoxical economy of intimacy and distance. Describing the glove figured in the last etching of the series entitled *Amor (Cupid)* (fig. 4.17), Pierre notes the ways in which the impression of its tactile and warm surface conjures a sensuous image of the female body (and implicitly, of female sexuality). But whilst evoking the flesh of this departed sexualised body, the glove's soft and pliant 'skin' is also discarded, utterly empty. Pierre describes Klinger's found glove as symbolic of a femininity in which the female subject remains "à tout jamais proche et inaccessible, présent et absente", a fantasy of proximity from which she is inevitably displaced.<sup>30</sup>

Many of Woodman's photographs seem to explore this paradox, her frequent use of the glove functioning as a similar marker of both absence and presence. It is highly likely that Woodman had access to Pierre's text whilst at RISD, and she was certainly aware of Klinger's etchings, as George Woodman identified a photographic series she made

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<sup>27</sup> Uzanne, *The Sunshade, The Glove, The Muff*, p. 5

<sup>28</sup> See Memory Jockish Holloway and Irena Zdanowicz (eds), *Max Klinger, Love, Death and the Beyond* (Victoria: National Gallery of Victoria, 1981); Elizabeth Steicher and J. Kirk T. Varnedoe (eds), *Graphic Works of Max Klinger* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977); and Robert L. Delevoy, *Symbolists and Symbolism* (Geneva: Skira & London: Macmillan London Ltd., 1978).

<sup>29</sup> See Steicher and Varnedoe, *Graphic Works*, p. xiv. Inspired by his reading of the tales of E.T.A. Hoffman, Klinger's cycle is interpreted here as symptomatic of a sublimated sexuality, a disturbed subjectivity that results in this pre-Freudian elaboration of fetishistic displacement. Donald Kuspit explored Klinger's imagery in relation to a Freudian theory of fetishism in 'The Modern Fetish' in *Artforum*, vol. 27, no. 2 (October 1988), p. 138.

<sup>30</sup> Pierre, 'Le Gant', p. 136.



between 1976 and 1979 as a direct response to the cycle of prints (figs. 4.18-4.22).<sup>31</sup> Staged in the faded elegance of a Roman café-bar, Woodman's series of five photographs feature herself alongside her friend, Italian artist Sabina Mirri.<sup>32</sup> No longer simply a sexual fetish, Woodman's glove appears a narrative prop around which the hint of 'action' hinges, as the trace of her fluctuating presence.<sup>33</sup>

In the first photograph from the series (fig. 4.18), Woodman (on the left) appears seated next to her female companion. Illuminating just one side of Woodman's face, the sunlight falling from the left throws the rest of her body into deep shadow, in contrast with Mirri's well-lit form. Woodman's posture is slightly stiff, slightly contrived, as she clasps her leather-gloved hands in her lap, her pose echoed by the pale sunlit skin of Mirri's ungloved hands as they rest between her own knees. In the second image, (fig. 4.19), Woodman is absent: taken from outside of the café, the shot shows an elderly man seated in the foreground, whilst Mirri is glimpsed peering out through the window.

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<sup>31</sup> George Woodman (in conversation with the author, New York, April 2002) linked the series of photographs under discussion here to Klinger's cycle of etchings. Klinger's imagery had been re-discovered by an American audience in the mid-70s, the first English edition of the series being published in 1977 following the exhibition of the entire cycle and related drawings at the Carus Gallery in New York in 1974.

<sup>32</sup> This figure was identified by George Woodman, in conversation with the author (New York, March 2002).

<sup>33</sup> As this series was not amalgamated by Woodman herself, it was collected posthumously within the archive of her photographs in the order described above. As this might not be the order originally intended by the artist, my reading of the works is necessarily fluid; as the suggestion of narrative provoked itself remains open and unfixed, this does not seem too problematic for the purposes of interpretation here. The café-style setting, and the photographs' sequential conception might point to another source, one contemporaneous with Woodman's practice, and which itself was probably inspired by Klinger's set of etchings — Duane Michals' 1974 narrative sequence entitled *The Pleasures of the Glove*. In Michals' series of 17 photographs, the glove plays a similar role to Klinger's iconic prop, becoming an autonomous object through which the heterosexual desire of Michals' male actor is played out. Having seen a pair of ladies' gloves in a shop window during his daily visits, the central male character is shown sitting in a café, becoming more and more obsessed with his own gloves. As his desire for the women's gloves grows, he begins to fantasise about the soft interiority of one of his own gloves, the dark "furry tunnel" into which he slips his hand out of curiosity. The vaginal analogy is further exaggerated in a later frame, as the glove 'eats' his hand, invoking a terrifying model of voracious femininity. The remainder of the sequence shows the male character on a bus, staring at a woman who wears just one black leather glove: as she brings her own gloved hand to her face, he imagines his hand taking its place, allowing him to caress her (now naked) body with the pliant leather surface. Back to reality, she gets up from her seat, leaving behind her glove, which the man duly picks up and closely inspects in her absence. Transported into the elegant interior of a Roman tea-shop, Woodman's series uses similar props, her tea-cups and pots appearing as the refined and genteel equivalents of Michals' ordinary mugs and metallic pot. Without the inclusion of text, a more subtle narrative content is instead elicited by the relationships staged between the figures, a network of gestures and staged looks which revolve around the manipulation of Woodman's glove. Michals' use of sequence and text pioneered the resurgence of interest in narrative photography, and may have provided the impetus for Woodman's own utilisation of serial and book formats. Max Kozloff has linked the work of the two photographers in terms of their exploration of temporality through their manipulation of motion and blur, in his essay 'The Etherealised Figure and the Dream of Wisdom', in Eugenia Parry Janis, Max Kozloff & Adam D. Weinberg, *Vanishing Presence* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center & New York: Rizzoli, 1989).



Though gnarled and weighty, the form of the man's unclasped hands seems to repeat the pose of the women's hands in the previous photograph. Inside again in the third image, (fig. 4.20), Woodman has re-appeared. Seemingly in the same setting as the first photograph, here the camera has been moved to take the shot directly in front of the two women, sitting alongside the slightly shifted table.

Again in contrast to the solidity of Mirri's half-illuminated face and crisply bright blouse, Woodman is captured as a diffuse shadow, her dark-hatted head and formally-suited body blurring softly into the dark corner. No longer clearly distinct, the features of her face are muddled and blurred, lending her form an air of ghostly ephemerality heightened by the hazy quality of her leather-clad hands, through which a trace of the metal edge of the tea-tray is just discernible. More 'solid' in the fourth image (fig. 4.21), Woodman appears now without her jacket on, as if swooning across the central band of the photograph's field, her face cropped by the top framing edge. This time her gloves are off, and she holds one in each uncovered hand, their leathery surface dark against the soft pale fabric of her dress. Mirri remains seated behind the tea-table in the background, looking down as if unaware of Woodman's strange movement across the room, her own hands hidden. In the final image Mirri looks up toward Woodman, whose back view fills half the frame (fig. 4.22). Woodman's gloved left hand holds its corresponding right-hand partner behind her back, in a downward gesture mirrored by the gesture of Mirri's bare arm held upward against the base of her throat.

Looking toward Woodman's unseen face, Mirri's dark-eyed gaze locks the pair into a relationship of closed-circuit looks, eliciting a narrative content which is further suggested by the use of the glove as a prop. In this shot, Woodman holds the glove almost like a concealed weapon, an object that seems to have provoked Mirri's gesture of surprise, vulnerability, or perhaps even defensive supplication. Throughout the series the glove exaggerates the women's hand gestures, doubling the pose of their hands in the first shot, mirroring them in the final shot, and heightening the already over-played gesture that Woodman acts out in the penultimate image. Although the setting is somewhat ambiguous, as the background of the fourth shot (fig. 4.21) seems to reveal a bar, Woodman's habitually carefully chosen props create the sense of a markedly domestic and feminine space. Surrounded by the tea-pots and cups associated with genteel feminine ritual and gossipy social interaction, the setting of the two figures is



also imbued with a faded old-world grandeur, an anachronistic quality upheld by Woodman's old-fashioned costume. Like silent film stills from a bygone era, the suggested atmosphere is reminiscent of cinematic melodrama, a genre which frequently centres on the relationships staged between female characters, often set within cluttered and claustrophobic domestic spaces.<sup>34</sup>

The relationships staged between Woodman and Mirri, however, are ultimately unknowable, the narrative obscure and unfixed. Rather than interacting, there is a sense in which the two figures merely mirror each other, producing the effect of a kind of doubled or split feminine presence, an 'excess' of femininity that heightens the melodramatic tension. In only one photograph do the women appear to look at one another: in the first shot (fig. 4.18), both women look toward the camera, Mirri's slightly blank look contrasting with Woodman's more knowing, secretive gaze which solicits the spectator. In the second image (fig. 4.19), Mirri is shown looking out through the window toward the figure of the old man, whose own unknowing gaze avoids the camera. In the third shot Mirri looks out whilst Woodman's gaze is obscured in blurred motion (fig. 4.20), whilst in the fourth shot, Woodman's face has been sliced by the photograph's top framing edge, and Mirri looks away, her eyes cast down (fig. 4.21). It is only in the final photograph, in which Woodman's face is paradoxically completely hidden, that the two figures appear to look directly at each other. Here, Mirri has raised her eyes in an almost alluring manner heightened by the gesture of her hand at her bared throat, as if to meet Woodman's own gaze, locking the pair into a network of desiring looking which remains tantalisingly unresolved. Seated in this final shot, Mirri's static passivity contrasts with Woodman's fluctuating presence, dramatising the movement of the photographer across the series. Whilst Mirri's body remains somewhat constant, appearing in each shot in a hardly varying pose, Woodman herself appears and disappears. Fading away in a blur of light, then coming back into focus from another angle, she performs a spatial revolution around Mirri's body. Woodman's role is explicated as one of motion in contrast to Mirri's immobility. Flitting in and out of the frame, Woodman dramatises her active role in the production of the image.

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<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of the feminised genre of melodrama, see for example Mary Anne Doane's *Femme Fatales, Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York & London, Routledge 1991).



But by staging her female 'characters' as passive model and active artistic agent, a relationship which is at once exaggerated and confused by the ambiguous nature of the two women's exchange of looks, Woodman also complicates the problem of self-representation. By splitting the female presence in the series, Woodman reproduces the ways in which her own subjectivity undergoes a similar process of fracturing and bifurcation in the process of image-making. Leaving her place behind the lens in order to take up her position under its scrutinising gaze, Woodman's own presence is intrinsically split in the moment recorded by the camera.

The gloves seem bound up with this moment of displacement, as only Woodman herself wears or handles them in this sequence. Most obvious in the final image, their dark leathery surface contrasts with the pale skin of Mirri's consistently uncovered hands, like a shadowy negative inversion, describing Woodman's own artistic hand in a photographic language of absence. But in the second image, neither Woodman's body nor her gloves are shown. Remaining off-frame, this is the only shot in which Woodman retains her position behind the camera, as if performing here the active role that might be identified with the masculine presence of the old man outside. Glimpsed through the window, the female model remains inaccessible behind the glass, as if to mark the interface between feminine and masculine space. But elsewhere this division is upset, as Woodman manipulates the staging of each shot to reveal different aspects of the interior space. The bar which is revealed in the background of the fourth photograph situates the series in the hazy boundaries of public and private space, an ambiguous space of social intercourse which is complicated by Woodman's staging of a more intimate, more feminine setting in the first and third shots. Here the artist's choice of domestic props in an enclosed, shallow space creates a sense of intimacy slightly out of place in the café-bar's spaces of drinking, flirting and seduction. As if to collapse or confuse any easy gendering of the division of interior and exterior spaces, Woodman's careful manipulation of an ambiguous setting is echoed by her fleeting bodily movement between the two spheres.

Reappearing in the third photograph, Woodman's gloves draw attention to the artist's shifting position, drawing attention to the camera's own unfixed position, and in so doing introducing within the frame elements of the photograph's production. Whilst Woodman's displaced camera angles lend the series a cinematic quality, the disruption



of any linear narrative draws attention to the inherently photographic operations at work. Punctured by moments of absence—or self-absenting—the possibility of any narrative flow is fractured by her fluctuating presence, which highlights the series' internal gaps and seams. Drawing attention to the limits of the still photograph, Woodman's displacement also draws attention to the conditions of the framing edge, suggesting that in a project of self-representation, the subject is always just out of shot.

Just as Klinger's use of the intaglio process of the etching medium echoes the ways in which his female character's faceless subjectivity becomes imprinted on the psychic surfaces of the masculine narrator, Woodman's photographic series stages a similar reflexive interplay of medium and subject matter.<sup>35</sup> Her glove marks the departed presence of her hand, retaining an element of her subjectivity as a shadowy trace described within the limits of photographic language. As if dropped in the artist's wake, Woodman's glove traces her own disappearance, and just as a discarded glove retains an uncanny impression of its lost occupant, so the photograph records the cast off image of the subject once transfixed under the camera's gaze. Weaving a narrative of elusive bodily presence and displaced subjectivity, Woodman's glove exists in an analagous relationship to the photograph itself.

The terms of this inherently photographic operation are made more dramatic in another unpublished photograph, which was made between 1976 and 1977 and given the title *Compositone* (fig. 4.23). No longer her own model, Woodman has used a female friend or colleague as a substitute presence. She wears one white lacy glove, and is seated slumped awkwardly against the wall of the studio. Behind her an array of various gloves has been pinned up: of the five dark shapes, some appear stout and solid, whilst one is elegantly slender, hanging like a discarded silk stocking bearing traces of the body it once encased. Inches from the model's shoulder, another pale and shiny glove reaches downwards. The repeated glove forms echo the black and white curtain that serves as the background to Klinger's *Ruhe (Repose)*, in which his sacred glove lies in state on an ornate pedestal. Behind it, a number of white gloves are buttoned over a

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<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Steicher and Varnedoe state that Klinger's spare style and attention to detail could itself be described within a photographic vocabulary (*Graphic Works*, p. xiv). I would add that Klinger's dramatic use of dark black lines and large areas of plain white (even in version of the prints in which he added aquatint shading) also seems to ape photographic manipulations of negativity and positivity. In an image such as *Repose*, the contrasting use of stark black and white evokes a photographic negative, but as an etching – a positive image – these states are upset.



bar, falling finger first toward the floor, hung alternately palm out and palm hidden. Their idiosyncratic styling creates a strong vertical emphasis, a rigid linearity that is just offset by the exposed palms, each of which is unbuttoned, revealing a slightly agape dark slit which exposes the glove's interior. The connotations with the female body seem explicit, but the interplay of the phallic linearity of the back-sides with the softer and gaping curves of the under-sides seem to hint at an operation of gender slippage as any simple binary of femininity and masculinity is collapsed. Woodman's gloves in *Compositione* suggest a similar confusion: some of the outlines appear phallicised, whilst the soft fabric and the close relationship to the female body invest them with a feminine quality. Taped up messily, the mis-matched collection seems so banal, too ordinary, upsetting any possible fetishistic symbolism.

Perhaps the mere fact of the symbol's repetition could itself serve as a disruptive mechanism. In a later photograph taken in New York between 1979 and 1980 Woodman pinned up two pairs of sheer stockings (one dark, one pale) on the wall which forms the backdrop to the staging of a female figure lying supine on a chaise longue (fig. 4.24). Her naked torso has been girdled with a number of garter belts, the repeated bands of black and white fabric encircling the body with the elements of costume associated with sexuality and feminine display. Abigail Solomon-Godeau interprets Woodman's manipulation of these familiar elements of dress as a self-conscious strategy through which the scene of sexualised looking predicated on masculine heterosexual desire might be disturbed. By operating on a principle of addition, Solomon-Godeau suggests that the repeated elements of Woodman's "theater of the fetish" might be related to a Freudian dread of castration provoked by a proliferation of phallic symbols.<sup>36</sup>

But what interests me in relation to Woodman's use of the gloves in *Compositione* is the way in which they seem to play out a narrative of photography. Black against the white wall, the contrast of light and dark is repeated in the tones of the quilt of the floor, and

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<sup>36</sup> See Abigail Solomon-Godeau's essay, 'Just Like a Woman', which appeared in the Wellesley catalogue, and has been reprinted in *Photography at the Dock, Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 245. Interestingly, Woodman made a number of duplicates of this photograph, some printed in reverse, creating a kind of mirror image that heightens the mechanism of replication, but also suggests something about photographic representation itself, and how negative and positive exist within a relationship of reciprocal mirroring and opposition. The intimate connection and utmost polarity of negativity and



(perhaps less intentionally) on the model's own skin, as the bands of milky flesh contrast with sun-tanned skin, alluding to the photographic processes of development. This suggestion of the photographic states of 'negative' and 'positive' are exaggerated by Woodman's own absence in this shot, as she becomes a negative presence traced by the gloves that she leaves behind. As Suleiman notes with regard to *Horizontale* discussed above (fig. 4.13), the glove doubles Woodman's real hand, insisting on the artist's active presence in "arranging the scene".<sup>37</sup> This residual tracing of the artist's hand is made even more explicit in *Compositione* by the inclusion of further gloves—a matching pair this time—on the quilted floor. Lying next to a pair of scissors and a spool of tape, they bear witness to the act of self-binding Woodman performed in the creation of *Horizontale*, and the relationship between the two images is borne out by Woodman's affectation of the additional 'e' placed at the end of each title.<sup>38</sup> Lying collapsed but retaining the form of the hands they once encased, the gloves draw attention to Woodman's absence. Placed just away from the opened handles of the scissors used in the production of the *Horizontale* photograph, the positioning of the gloves forms another link in a chain of displacement, performed across the individual frames of the two photographs.

Looking closely at *Compositione* it is apparent that the cuffs of the black gloves pinned to the wall have been cropped at the top edge, only to re-appear elsewhere, in the bottom left corner of the first frame of the *Portrait of a Reputation* book (fig. 4.1). Infiltrating the containment of the book, Woodman's inclusion of these forms, which make little sense until you find the rest of the fragmented glove form in *Compositione*, displaces the viewer's gaze outside of the serial format, into the space off-frame. In the final shot of the series (fig. 4.5), the same dark gloves appear once more, Woodman's camera having shifted so that they now appear in the right-hand corner, traversing the photographic field. So dark against the whiteish wall, the tiny section of the glove's

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positivity seem further suggested by her use of black and white stockings, and the overlapping of both black and white suspender belts.

<sup>37</sup> Suleiman, 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance', p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> *Compositione* is the unpublished companion piece not only to *Horizontale*, but also another photograph entitled *Verticale* produced at around the same time. In her catalogue essay entitled 'Francesca Woodman: Problem Sets' (included in the 1986 Wellesley College Museum exhibition catalogue) reprinted in *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1999), Rosalind Krauss interprets the titles of the two published photographs as evidence of Woodman's formalist photographic education, showing how she became familiar with its rules through the working out of these set problems. Whilst the title of *Compositione* does suggest that it may have been created as a formal experiment, its suggested connection to the paired images *Verticale* and *Horizontale* does introduce into the problem an intriguing third term, upheld by Woodman's use in this image of a model as a substitute self.



sleeve is one of the few visual details in the shot, echoing the deep black of the inky handprints. By making these covert connections between her photographs, Woodman breaks open the limits imposed by the frame of the still photograph. Reflected in the fluid narrative suggested by the unfixed ordering of the tea-shop series, Woodman creates another hidden space of meaning across the frames of these disparate shots, to create a web of connections not only between a set of images related by the structural principle of a series, but to other seemingly self-contained photographs elsewhere. Woodman's practice of explicit self-reference not only upsets a serial logic, but also loosens the book format's enveloping structure.<sup>39</sup>

Woodman returned to the artist's book format time and time again over her short career. Using old geometry and mathematical workbooks, or curious found objects, such as the tiny nineteenth century notebook that once belonged to a Chinese diplomat, Woodman glued her own photographs into their used pages, sometimes interposing found text with her own cryptic hand-written messages, hand-coloured diagrams next to her own images.<sup>40</sup> Apart from one book, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, which was published in 1981, and consists of a series of photographs taped into the used pages of an old Italian geometry book, all of her other books remain unpublished.<sup>41</sup>

But what makes the *Portrait of a Reputation* book unique is that it was the only one Woodman produced in which she appears as her exclusive subject. Spirally bound, Woodman's photographs are pressed together, enclosed within two leaves of card, and the cover is inscribed with her hand-written title, the imprint of the artist's hand. As Susan Stewart has noted, the book always exists in an intimate relationship to a subject, becoming an emblem of the self. Made up an accumulation of pages that Stewart describes as a "set of surfaces" whose metaphors are of containment—of surface and

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<sup>39</sup> Mel Bochner notes the systematically self-exhausting nature of the serial form; by making explicit reference outside of her series, Woodman disrupts the contained solipsism of the method. See Mel Bochner, 'The serial attitude', *Artforum*, vol. 6, no. 4 (December 1967).

<sup>40</sup> Francesca Woodman made a number of artist's books, including works entitled *PF Equasions* and *Quaderno*, which appropriate Italian geometry notebooks as their support, and one dedicated to her *Angels* series. Whilst undertaking the Rhode Island School of Design's European exchange programme in Rome between May 1977 and 1978, Woodman became a frequent visitor to the *Libreria Maldoror* run by Giuseppe Casetti and Piero Missogi, where she encountered a wide range of Surrealist and Futurist publications. See Elizabeth Janus' essay 'Un sejour romain' included in Chandès, *Francesca Woodman*. According to George Woodman, the owners collected boxes of junk which included second-hand notebooks, which Woodman raided for her own work (in conversation with the author, New York, April 2002).

<sup>41</sup> *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* was published in January 1981 by Synapse Press in Philadelphia, shortly before Woodman's death on 19 January 1981.



depth, of concealment and exposure—the book is inscribed with a subjectivity forged from similar ambiguities.<sup>42</sup> The book's ability to evoke such a metonymic resonance seems important here, as Woodman's act of bodily disappearance over the units of the series seems to undermine the format's promise of enclosure and self-containment.

Of course the conceptual possibilities that the book format offered to the photographer had by this point long been recognised.<sup>43</sup> Originating in the sequential arrangement and repetitive imagery of Walker Evans' 1938 *American Photographs*, the book form was developed in the 1950s by Robert Frank's *The Americans*, and culminated in the experiments in seriality of the sixties and seventies, exemplified in such a book-work as Ed Ruscha's *26 Gasoline Stations* of 1963. No doubt motivated by a similar desire to exploit the format's alternative conceptual framework, Woodman adopted the book's sequential format and by-then standard layout in which a black and white photograph is placed on the right-hand page facing a blank on the opposite side. But Woodman's subject matter, along with the hand-made card covers and hand-scripted title inscribe the book with elements of her own subjectivity, introducing traces of selfhood seemingly at odds with the ostensibly 'deadpan' subject matter and anti-literary form exemplified by Ruscha's gas stations.<sup>44</sup> Woodman's craft-like aesthetic and insistence on self-depiction seems too precious, too artful to be considered within the same parameters of conceptual book-making practice.

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<sup>42</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 37.

<sup>43</sup> As Joanna Drew notes, the format of the 'artist's book' has now become a 'byword' for the art of the 1970s, the form growing out of Minimal and Conceptual art's vision of a de-commodified art work precipitated by the shift from object to idea. See Joanna Drew, in the foreword to *Artists' Books* (London: Council of Great Britain, 1976), p. 7. Whilst Clive Phillpot suggests that the 1960s saw a desire for art to reach a wider audience at a low cost, and that Conceptual Art's dissatisfaction with the art market economy lead to the importance of producing multiples and the shift from the emphasis on art object to idea, Stephen Bury notes that the book format inevitably served to provide Conceptual artists with "something to sell", subsequently becoming objects of high economic value. See Phillpot, 'Book Art Digressions' in *Artists' Books* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976), p. 20; and Bury, 'The Dictatorial Perpendicular: The Artists' Print and the Book', in the exhibition catalogue *Books by Artists* (Bristol: Impact Press, 1999), p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> See Kate Linker's discussion of Ruscha's series in 'The artist's book as an alternative space', *Studio International*, vol. 195, no. 990, 1 (1980), p. 77. Artist Eleanor Antin has offered a fascinating reading of Ruscha's gas station series: Antin re-subjectivises the perceived banality of his 'neutral' imagery, insisting that *26 Gasoline Stations* cannot be read as anything other than inherently autobiographical, as it creates a fragmented visual record of the artist's road trip to his childhood home. By taking photographs of the stations he encountered on this trip, which Antin describes as the "materials he finds close at hand", Ruscha produces an impossible map of convoluted detours. Fractured and selective, Ruscha's narrative becomes an autobiography which is "deliberately sparse and casual and filled with holes", riddled with the gaps in which, Antin suggests, "actual experience resides". See Eleanor Antin, 'Reading Ruscha', *Art in America*, vol. 61, no. 6 (Nov-Dec 1973), pp. 69 & 66. I am very grateful to Briony Fer for drawing my attention to this essay.



Perhaps it was the intimacy of the book format that interested Woodman, as the structure enabled her to control the work's affective environment, and shape the space of spectatorial encounter.<sup>45</sup> By repeatedly 'accidentally' clipping the tip of her head in the first four photographs, Woodman's technique seems to evoke a kind of amateurish aesthetic, heightened by her use of the craft-like covers and red-ribbon binding threaded through hand-punched holes. Small in size, and glued into the pages of a book, the sequence cannot help but appropriate the pre-existent structures of another kind of photographic book – the domestic album. A traditionally feminine format, the album frames an intimate space of viewing in which familial identities and relationships are formed and recorded. Woodman makes use of some of the poses entrenched within the album's instantly recognisable codes: in the first photograph her body is held rigid in an unnaturally stiff pose echoed by the gesture of her right arm pressed across her chest. Looking slightly down, the pose is highly staged, offering a sense of awkwardness that is replayed in the fourth shot. Here her posture is contorted, in a kind of contraposto as if crouching down to fit herself into both the shallow depicted space against the wall, and the frame of the photograph itself.<sup>46</sup>

As Martha Langford notes, these 'codes' are so instantly recognisable, so familiar, that the album has become condensed into an 'idea' that recurs within artistic practice, immediately conjuring up its relationship to familial histories and domestic life. As such, the album's rich connotations can be appropriated to frame projects in which the psychically negotiated subjectivities forged from domestic ideology and familial myth, so embedded within its pages, might be explicitly questioned.<sup>47</sup> Woodman's project here is more suggestive, her use of the characteristics associated with the album format part of a more subtle undoing of the form's codes. Rather than trying to narrate something about her identity through amalgamating a set of pictures from which we

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<sup>45</sup> See Riva Castleman, *A Century of Artists' Books* (New York: MOMA, 1994), p. 166.

<sup>46</sup> Marianne Hirsch notes the way in which photographic portraits in the family album often appear similar, as they usually show a recurring pose: frontally framed and in a slightly awkward stance, the subject's head is often accidentally cropped, and the natural lighting sometimes causes parts of the face to be left in deep shadow. Hirsch states that the use of these codes in artistic photographic practice cannot help but invoke this model of image-collecting. As an example of such a practice, Hirsch discusses the way in which these 'codes' are repeated in Ralph Eugene Meatyard's series, *The Album of Lucybelle Crater*. See Hirsch's *Family Frames, Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1997). The publication of Meatyard's artist's book in 1974 is another possible point of reference here, and it is discussed at length in relation to Woodman's use of masking and repetition in the final chapter of this thesis.



might get an impression of her 'self', Woodman instead seems to slip away. Progressively naked over the series, (as she reveals more of her body she reveals less of her 'self'), the specificities of her facial features are cropped, shadowed, or fractured in the process of self-imaging. Invoking a tradition of self-portraiture, but one that she unhitches from a project of self-portrayal, the wording of Woodman's title echoes the self-displacement she performs. Portraying a 'reputation', she sketches a deceptive and illusory identity, one constructed by an other, which precedes or follows its subject, but from which it is always displaced. Escaping the confines of the photographic frame and the pages of her book, the metonymic relationship to both body and self has been somehow severed.

As Woodman's body weaves in and out of view, the sequence constructs a narrative of erasure, its serial format binding together a set of disparate images, in a strategy of collecting which echoes the operations of the album itself. Whilst offering the fantasy of an homogenous 'self', the album, as Susan Stewart points out, actually constructs a mythic identity. A collection of fundamentally performative photographs, these images of the self become "souvenirs" of half-remembered experience, adding up to form a visual "compendium which is an autobiography".<sup>47</sup> But whilst offering an imaged repertoire of selfhood, the photographs in the album cannot help but point out gaps and absences, that which is left out, deemed unsuitable or too trivial to be recorded for posterity. Narrating a story of identity, the album's pages suppress an alternative story, one that lurks beneath the gloss of the visual surface, sinking into the gaps.

It is the album's inherently discontinuous narrative that Woodman exploits, and using its pages as the space for representing a self undergoing a process of disappearance, she suggests that the act of photographic self-portraiture can only construct a similarly mythic, or false identity. The discontinuity of the narrative is further disrupted by the format, as whilst apparently binding a series to create some sort of unity, the visual book functions as another fracturing device. Essentially fragmented, the codex structure can only ever provide a composite set of single-leaved "slivers", which would remain disconnected if it were not for the gaps between them, absences which punctuate and

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<sup>47</sup> See Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations, The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal, Kingston, London & Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), p. 29.

<sup>48</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 139.



regulate the narrative flow.<sup>49</sup> With each left-hand page blank, the gaps in Woodman's book are obvious, and her series of just five photographs adds up to a mere handful of fragments. Coalescing to form a narrative that is inherently flawed, Woodman slips into those gaps where something is "left unsaid".<sup>50</sup>

But it is in these spaces, these gaps that the viewing subject is interpellated. Each alternate blank page demands physical interaction, the necessary act of turning the page luring the spectator's body into a moment of skin-contact. Inviting the motor action needed for the transition between each discrete image, the haptic appeal of the artist's book is an inherent component of the format, as it exploits a human fascination with touch. Dog ears that bear witness to avid handling, smudges of oil from the surface of the skin, crumbs of food — the inclusion within the book's pages of these traces of bodily waste draws attention to the physicality of the viewing act. Provoking a moment of inter-subjective communion, the act of page-turning is described by Stephen Bury as an imaginary re-creation of a "shared, common skin, where the touch of the artist meets the touch of the reader".<sup>51</sup>

To describe the pages of the artist's book as possible spaces of fantasmatic reunion with the absent maternal subject might be indicative of another fetishising project. Bury invokes Didier Anzieu's theory in which subjectivity is extricated from its original relationship with the originary maternal body-skin, their haptic communion becoming imprinted on psychic spaces to form the background sac necessary for subsequent processes of introjection and projection through which the subject is individuated.<sup>52</sup> Persisting as a myth of lost communion, the idea of the shared skin is for Bury an analogy of the book itself, and inspires his reading of the page of the book as a reparative surface through which the subject and the lost maternal body might be re-

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<sup>49</sup> See Keith A. Smith's discussion of the artist's book format in *The Structure of the Visual Book* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1984), p. 53.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 17 & 53. This interpretation of the book's internal fragmentation again brings to mind Eleanor Antin's reading of Ruscha's displaced and evacuated autobiography, as it in the series' omissions and spaces that the viewing subject might enter. See Antin, 'Reading Ruscha', p. 66.

<sup>51</sup> Stephen Bury, *The Body and the Book* (London: Flaxman Press, 1996), unpaginated.

<sup>52</sup> But whilst offering an imaginary space of collective binding and the re-constitution of an all-encompassing maternal skin, within the strictures of Anzieu's project, the shared skin, and thus the book itself, can only ever function as fetish-objects, by proffering a promise of absolute bonding, absolute skin-closeness to original homogeneity, that is, the phallic mother. See Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, (trans. Chris Turner) (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989). As it is predicated on the suppression of the maternal subject, Anzieu's theory exemplifies one strand of psychoanalytic thought criticised by Luce Irigaray during the 1970s; this is discussed in relation to Woodman's photographic emphasis on skin and disrupted surfaces in the second chapter of this thesis.



joined in fantasy.<sup>53</sup> However, within the strictures of Anzieu's project, in which the maternal subject is repressed, concealed and objectified, this moment of reparation is always deferred, the fantasy of reunion with the maternal body a psychotic sign of a devastating collapse of a subject's individuation.

The impossibility of such a promise of absolute skin-closeness is made clear in Woodman's manipulation of the format, as her book seems carefully constructed to exaggerate this appeal to a sense of touch, seducing the viewing subject into a bodily encounter with its contents. Most of Woodman's photographs are small, and are here enlarged to roughly twenty centimetres squared. They demand close viewing, offering the promise of an intimate space of viewing, which Duane Michals' has described as a "one-to-one" encounter staged within its pages.<sup>54</sup> But more than this, Woodman herself seems to lure us into this encounter, as she holds out her hand in invitation: in the *Portrait of a Reputation*, Woodman's self-painting appeals to a physical sense, and the position of her hand-prints on her body and on the wall seem to shadow the hands of the viewer in the imaginary act of turning the page. As if touching the hand of the artist, the illusion of communion is heightened by the book's small-scale and portability, the (often fantasmatic) possibility of being held in the hand.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Roland Barthes imagines a similar fantasy of communion with the maternal body via the reparative surface of the photograph in *Camera Lucida* (originally published as *La Chambre Claire*, by Editions du Seuil: Paris 1980).

<sup>54</sup> Duane Michals, interviewed by Marco Livingstone, in *Duane Michals, Photographs/ Sequences/ Texts, 1958-1984* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1984) unpaginated. In this light, his 'glove' series might in some way dramatise this relationship by offering up a fantasy of touch. The leather glove that his male character imagines wearing in frames 11-14 becomes the surface which touches the naked female skin, a mediatory surface which although masking his own hand, might also offer a space of imaginary identification, one into which we might imagine slipping our own hand.

<sup>55</sup> Chris Taylor suggests that the "portability of the book allows it to be easily removed/transferred from the gallery/exhibition context into the personal, and, dare I say it, domestic environment, a venue some would argue more suitable to craft rather than the fine arts." See 'Mortality, Immortality and Books' in *Books by Artists*, (Bristol: Impact Press, 1999), p. 2. Taylor's disparaging tone serves not only to denigrate the value of the artist's book because it is somehow linked to domestic space, and thus to femininity, but also to shore up the dichotomy of transcendent masculine art and personal feminine art. The 'intimacy' of the viewing act is just one of the qualities invested in that book format that has been used to explain its 'popularity' (perhaps 'suitability'?) for women artists. Stephen Bury suggests that it provided a space of exhibition outside of the 'masculine' gallery system, and that is also allows the space for the rejection of a unilinear narrative in favour of a polymorphous text, a strategy he links to female art practice. See *Artists' Books, The Book as a Work of Art* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995.) Clive Phillpot also sees the book as an alternative space of exhibition, pointing out that the book format allows the artist control over what was once seen as a secondary source of their work, becoming in the process a primary source. See Clive Phillpot, 'Book Art Digressions', p. 20. In a later essay, Stephen Bury also suggests that the book format depends also on its inherent horizontality, which he describes as a collapse of phallic verticality. See Bury, 'The Dictatorial Perpendicular', p. 12.



But if we were to imagine Woodman's own hand-prints as spaces in which mutual touch might meet, it could only ever be a missed encounter.<sup>56</sup> Dark against her pale skin and the white-washed studio wall in the final image of the book, her hand-prints appear as 'negative' spaces on these light surfaces. Predicated upon a moment of absolute proximity, the gentle pressure of her own inked-up skin against the plaster 'skin' of the wall is here recorded as the negative trace of that action, the final imprints appearing like the shadows cast by her hands on the surface of the negative itself.

The intimate and inextricable relationship of negative and positive states in photographic development is one with which Woodman seemed fascinated throughout her career, and it is played out repeatedly through her exclusive use of the black and white medium.<sup>57</sup> Using a camera requiring large-scale negatives meant that she was often able to use the process of contact printing not only as a means of rapidly producing test prints, but also as an end in itself.<sup>58</sup> The act of sandwiching together the printing paper and the negative under glass depends on intimate proximity, the touch of the negative's emulsified surface against the paper itself alluding to a kind of skin contact.<sup>59</sup>

This intimate correlation of the positive print to its negative inverse was re-staged in two photographs taken in 1976: in one (fig. 4.25), Woodman appears naked and seated on a wooden chair, with her feet clad in her trade-mark mary-jane slippers. Her face is characteristically out of shot, as her body is cropped at the waist. On the floor before her is a shadowy bodily form, created by imprinting her body onto light-sensitive powder sprinkled over the floorboards, fixing a penumbral image on the whiteness of the ground. Another presence in the shot, the grey and ghostly form functions as a cast off image, marking the splitting of the artistic subject, Woodman's position both behind

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<sup>56</sup> Due to its fragility, Woodman's book is not able to be hand-held, and as it is currently unpublished, the experience unfortunately remains a fantasy.

<sup>57</sup> This was not unusual, as most students of photography at this time trained using the black and white process. George Woodman also suggested that at this time, fine art photography was equated with the monochrome print (in conversation with the author, New York, April 2002).

<sup>58</sup> Woodman used for the most part a Yashica Mat twin lens reflex camera, which produces negatives of 6cm x 6cm; but after her graduation from RISD, she began to use a Supergraphic press camera, whose larger negatives (measuring roughly 9 cm by 10 cm) allowed the creation of finely detailed contact prints. Information supplied by George Woodman (in conversation with the author, New York, April 2002).

<sup>59</sup> Woodman's interest in the possibilities offered by the medium's indexical properties perhaps culminated in the artist's experimentation with the 'diazotype' process toward the end of her career. Some of these large blue-prints measured 14 foot square; whilst some have been donated to the Metropolitan Museum in New York City, due to their extreme fragility and liability to degrade in light, they are at present unavailable for viewing.



and in front of the camera. But in the other shot (fig. 4.26), almost a twin, Woodman has included the whole of her body. Her hands and feet are held in a similar pose, but her face is included as she sits in front of a bright window. A large piece of almost translucent paper has been pinned across the glass pane, appearing as an overly exposed rectangle of white. Sitting awkwardly between the dark impression of her body on the floor, and the blank white rectangle of paper over the window, Woodman's image seems trapped between the 'negative' state described on the left of the frame and the light-fulfilled 'positive' space of the undeveloped print to the right.

In these sister shots, Woodman makes clear the way in which the subject is always just displaced from both the inverted mirror-image reflection recorded on the negative and its subsequent development as a positive image. By using the print's surface as the space on which this relationship is re-staged, Woodman seems to expose a moment in the positive image's own production. In the fourth shot of the *Portrait of a Reputation* series, Woodman fixes a similarly dark imprint on her own skin, as if re-staging the 'negative' on her own body. Using the skin of the female body as the impressionable surface, Woodman reverses the logic of photographic representation, appropriating the negative's voided surface as the perfect foil for the staging of a progressively absented self. Attempting an impossible re-enactment of the positive print's own inverse, Woodman's series seems to bring to light photography's shadowy underbelly, that negative state described by Peggy Phelan as the photograph's own "unconscious".<sup>60</sup> Never fully repressed, the negative moment lingers as a persistent and unfulfilled shadow lurking beneath the print's glossy surface, which, as Phelan puts it, "the eye remembers".<sup>61</sup>

The interplay of negative and positive states is described in a less obvious way throughout the series, as in all of the photographs the central band occupied by Woodman's body is bathed in a light which gently diffuses toward the edge of each frame, becoming gradually more shadowy. Most explicit in the third and fourth shots, these dark corners, whilst silhouetting Woodman's form with a kind of solarized auratic

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<sup>60</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked, The Politics of Performance* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 70. By using Luce Irigaray's exposition of woman's multiplicity as profoundly destabilising to a traditional psychoanalytic construction of the 'one' (the always masculine subject) through the suppression of the other, the maternal subject, Phelan maps both the photographic print and femininity onto the 'ontology of the copy,' as they both fill in, or develop the 'other/wise'.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.



halo, also serve to upset the dichotomy of negative and positive. The strange effect of double-printing in the second photograph, in which Woodman's face appears fractured, evokes the transitional space between two frames on a negative. Half clearly-lit, half in shadow, the crisp line slicing her face suggests an axis around which her face is mirrored, becoming a kind of crease, or "virtual fold" through which the correlating and indexical opposites of negative and positive space might be pressed together, re-uniting bright figure and dark ground, and vice versa.<sup>62</sup> No longer absolute, each state becomes confused, polluted by varying levels of light. Thinking about such a confusion of light and dark, of negative and positive, Douglas Crimp notes that ultimately the "referents of our descriptive language are dissolved", as the subject of such a photograph escapes being pinned down.<sup>63</sup> Complicating the photograph's own terms of reference, the merging of positive and negative fixes the image within a "language germane only to the photographic", in which the manipulation of the photographic medium of light becomes the only subject.<sup>64</sup> Hard to describe, Woodman's own manipulation of light and dark works within the limits of the medium's own terms of description, reducing her imaged performance to an operation of photographic logic.

Obsessively re-staging this confusion of absence and presence, Woodman proves the very conditions of the photographic print's production. In each shot the artist stages a photography *en abyme*, but by extending the boundaries of the still image to create a progressive sequence, Woodman borrows a cinematic element. Not merely a photo within a photo, Woodman's series makes reference to the entire photographic process, in a sequential format that simultaneously draws attention to, and disrupts the limits of the positive print, by alluding to those concealed or half-remembered processes through which it is reproduced.

Stretched out over the five shots glued into the pages of her album, Woodman's series plays out what Jean Baudrillard has described as the "moment" of the negative, a

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<sup>62</sup> See Craig Owens' discussion of self-reflexive photographic practice in 'Photography *en abyme*', *October* 5 (Summer 1978), p. 85. This essay was included in a special issue of the journal dedicated to a discussion of photographic practices exploring the "puzzles and conundrums inscribed within the medium". See the editors' introduction to *October* 5 (Summer 1978), p. 3. Max Kozloff discerned a similar shift in the photographic climate, explored in his 1976 article entitled 'Photos within Photographs' published in *Artforum*, vol. 14, no. 6 (February 1976). Kozloff discusses here the work of a generation of young photographers beginning to explore the camera's distorting and manipulating gaze. As Kozloff met Woodman sometime during the late 1970s her might have had her practice in mind.

<sup>63</sup> See Douglas Crimp, 'Positive/Negative: A Note on Degas's Photographs', *October* 5 (Summer 1978), p. 99.

suspended and persistent moment that is never entirely suppressed in the developed positive print.<sup>65</sup> Repeatedly using her own body, Woodman re-enacts this moment on her own skin, suspending it for the duration of the five pages. As her own hand-prints shadow our own touch on the page, the spectatorial body is drawn into the sequential process, our act of page-turning seeming to animate the serial imagery of the artist's body. Roughly the same size and posed in similar position in each shot, Woodman's body seems to come alive as the pages of her book are flicked between thumb and finger. Becoming a kind of 'flick-book', Woodman's animated disappearance plays out the drama of photographic self-representation as it hinges on the moment of the negative.

In the first shot, Woodman appears fully clothed for the camera. Her black glove exaggerates the slightly awkward pose, and functions as a decorative element of costume, the image representing the way in which a subject might dress up, and prepare herself before finally striking a pose for the camera. In the second photograph, Woodman's face has all but disappeared, obscured by the strange fracture across the frame, which configures the 'click' of the shutter, that snap-shot instant in which the subject is 'cut' from the world.<sup>66</sup> The black glove remains, but in the third shot it has gone, leaving its trace as a thick black outline, as Woodman holds her arms back against the background wall in a gesture of surrender to the camera. Heightening the contrast of black and white, of negative and positive, the black outline hovers like the inverse aureole that the eye sees, or remembers in reverse, after the pop of the flash gun. Describing the moment of light falling onto the negative's sensate surface, this shot dramatises the way in which the photographic image is drawn in light. Like a retinal afterimage, the moment of the negative lingers on her skin, to be 'developed' in the fourth image as the dark smudges which mark the artist's body in fetishised code of sexual lack that echoes photography's own language of absence. Alluding to her now absented body, Woodman's inky handprints in the final shot mark the white wall of her studio. Like a reduced version of the book's page, the wall's rectilinear field duplicates the spaces of photographic representation — the light-sensitive emulsion on the frame of the negative, and the blank surface of the undeveloped print.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>65</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Art of Disappearance', in Nicholas Zurbrugg (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard, Art and Artefact* (London, Thousand Oaks & New York: Sage Publications, 1997), p. 28.



Flicking through the pages, the process of photographic image-making is animated, but only at the cost of losing Woodman, as the artist slips from view. Fracturing and hiding her face, Woodman's book does not offer the possibility of animating a "living portrait" of the artist, an attenuated photographic moment in which the subject might seem to appear.<sup>67</sup> In our hands, the act of page-turning sets in play a progressive sequence in which, conversely, the artist disappears. For whilst the action of the viewer works to weave a kind of performance from each of Woodman's poses once held still and captured by the click of the camera, it is always a performance of loss. Activated only in the hands of the spectator in the fantasy of page-turning, the artist's performative gestures are displaced from her body, and extricated from the original moment of the work's production.<sup>68</sup>

By imagining the act of leafing through these pages to animate this retroactive performance, it is the interaction of the spectatorial subjectivity that sets in motion the process through which Woodman disappears. This missed encounter is echoed by the way in which our hands, whilst seeming to meet the reciprocal touch of Woodman's own, can only meet her hand's imprint, her negative trace, as her dark handprints become the shadows of our own touch. Denying the possibility of a reparative encounter, Woodman's negative handprints become the traces of the process of photographic absencing staged throughout the retrospective performance. Endlessly replaying the negative, Woodman re-enacts the moment of displacement in which the photographic image is irrevocably extricated from its link to its material referent. Using her body as her 'proof', Woodman rehearses the photographic art of disappearance — an act of illusory representation dependent on a stage of negative inversion, the moment in which, according to Baudrillard, the subject "vanishes into the image", as she is sucked into the void.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> See Dubois, *L'Acte Photographique*.

<sup>67</sup> See Stephen Herbert's essay 'Animated Portrait Photography', *History of Photography*, vol. 13 (Jan-March 1989) for a discussion of early twentieth century animation devices, which were often publicised as being able to create 'living portraits' of their subjects. Herbert notes that during the sixties and early seventies automatic photobooths also offered serial portraits.

<sup>68</sup> As Woodman's book is bound with a single red ribbon tied in the top left hand corner, there is a possibility of the artist 'reappearing', the spiral binding suggesting a limitless page-turning and never-ending repeatability. Like a reel of film on a loop, Woodman would be subjected to an eternal process of coming and going, a fluctuating presence which itself reflects the unfixable nature of the photographic subject.

<sup>69</sup> Baudrillard, 'The Art of Disappearance', p. 28.



By 're-staging' the negative on her own skin, on the blank wall, and on the structural framework of the print, Woodman seems to probe photography's shadowy heart. Exposing those moments in which the subject's absolute absence is necessary for the production of the positive image, Woodman's series rehearses the photographic "art of disappearance".<sup>70</sup> Characterised by disconnection, eradication, discontinuity and disjunction, photography, for Baudrillard, is almost the "perfect crime".<sup>71</sup>

But in her act of disappearance, Woodman leaves a series of incriminating clues. Whilst she uses her image to create a set of fragmented shots which are re-activated in the viewing encounter to fulfil the photographic fate of what Max Kozloff describes as 'prevanishment', she leaves traces of her presence fixed indelibly on each print's surface.<sup>72</sup> The hand of the absented artist leaves its mark, a visual echo of the black fabric of the glove she loses after the second shot. Drawing attention to the displacement of the artist as the producer of the image, the glove obscures Woodman's hand beneath its light-absorbing fabric skin, as if preserving the impression of the negative's empty void. But rich in connotations, the glove also spins a narrative thread, a web of connotations that confuse and distract the viewer. Whilst it marks the artist's fluctuating presence as she seems to vanish into the unseen and hidden spaces between the frames of each of her photographs, the glove's obscure narrative and resonant symbolism act as a decoy to lure the gaze, as it both conceals and reveals the subject. Like the seductive illusion of presence offered by the image itself, the glove draws attention away from the photographic sleight of hand in which the subject disappears. Disrupting the photographic language of presence and absence, of positive and negative, the glove hovers, a persistent stain on the surface of the print, an ambiguous presence

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Max Kozloff uses this term in his discussion of Duane Michals. Describing the way that the photograph not only records what has been, but also what might have been, invoking a haunting and unfixed conditional tense. Kozloff describes the photographic scene as 'prevanished', the objects under representation "not exactly summoned into presence, but alluded to", echoing the chain of displacements and Woodman herself performs. See *Duane Michals: Now Becoming Then* (Altadena, CA: Twin Palms Publishers, 1990) (unpaginated).



tracing Woodman's own subjectivity in flux. Always just out of shot, Woodman leaves her trace, her empty image abandoned like a dropped glove, an emptied out trace of her haunting presence marked as an illusory shadow floating between self and other.

### Behind the Mask: Repetition and Inter-Subjective Space

As a voracious reader of the literature of Gertrude Stein, Francesca Woodman began to develop her own imitative style of prose, in artful and self-consciously performative acts of what she called her own 'Stein-writing'.<sup>1</sup> Snippets of fragmented text, littered with repeated words and the echoes of doubled phrases, appear in the many personal diaries and notebooks Woodman produced throughout her lifetime. But whilst these texts provide compelling evidence of Woodman's own writerly accomplishments and intellectual precocity, it would be interesting to consider how Stein's modernist language of fragmented disembodiment and dissociation, and her othered, self-projected voice might have been translated into a medium of visual representation in the hands of the young photographer.

Facing the title page of the 1933 edition of Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, there is a black and white photograph taken by Man Ray (fig. 5.1).<sup>2</sup> This photograph bears the caption 'Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein', and captures Stein in the act of writing, her shadowed face looking downward, as she is seated behind the heavy wooden desk which splits the frame. In the background, Alice appears at the threshold of the door, looking at the camera, her form flooded in light. In the transitional space between interior and exterior, Alice makes a step toward Stein's firmly entrenched position inside, as if acting out the book's displaced narrative, the projected autobiography told by a dissociated subject. Stein remains the obscure writing subject, Alice the clarified, visible speaking subject.

But the photograph itself depends on a third party, the third person viewpoint embodied by Man Ray, as photographer, authorial eye, and unseen presence off-camera. Always out-of-shot, his invisible presence introduces into the visualisation of a split and alienated subjectivity a third term, the suggestion of a tripartite subjectivity evoked by Stein's alienated and dissociated autobiographical act. The photograph's caption

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<sup>1</sup> In discussion of the literary sources and inspiration Woodman made use of throughout her life, George Woodman remembered how Francesca avidly read Stein's work, and offered this anecdote as evidence of the young photographer's intelligence and precocious intellectual and literary capacity (in conversation with the author, New York, April 2002).

<sup>2</sup> The photograph bears the caption 'Alice B Toklas and Gertrude Stein, from a photograph by Man Ray (undated)', and appears as the frontispiece to the 1933 edition of Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Ltd.).



acknowledges Man Ray's role in the production of the image, but brings to mind questions of authorship and self-representation: used as the frontispiece to Stein's displaced autobiography, Man Ray's photograph draws attention to his covert presence, a presence which echoes the position of Stein's disembodied voice. For Stein's development of a 'disembodied' modernist narrative as the vehicle of her literary portraits—both of herself and of others—introduced a radical and ambiguous third person point of view, framing an inter-subjective space in which self-perception is externalised, cast-out from a stable subject identification.<sup>3</sup> Using another as her speaking subject, Stein's autobiographical narrative tells the tale of a fractured and estranged self, an "inside as seen from the outside".<sup>4</sup> Her alienated method of representation resonates with the language of photographic self-portraiture, a format that stages, records and provokes a similar sense of dissociation. Laid bare under the camera's gaze, the imaged self is always both subject and object, yet somehow not quite either, locked in a network of unstable positions and shifting inter-subjective identifications.

It is within this network of shifting identifications that Woodman's own obsessive interest in the problems of photographic portrayal seems to reside. By placing herself under her camera's gaze, Woodman's repeated acts of self-depiction engage with similar questions of identity, each performative act necessarily provoking a splitting of subjectivity, as the artistic subject becomes the object of representation. Whilst Woodman's use of the photograph as the medium of her repeated acts of self-representation cannot help but provoke a process of self-othering similar to the one engendered through Stein's alienated narrative, in this chapter I want to suggest that the displacement of the subject on which photography depends is also driven by Woodman's manipulation of the medium's own temporality. As such, I will relate Woodman's use of repetitive and serial imaging to Stein's strategic use of repetition in the creation of her literary portraits, as her internally fragmented narratives hinge on the writer's attempts to disrupt—or suspend—the temporality of the text.

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<sup>3</sup> Stein described the modernist strategy of 'disembodiment' in American literature in her essay 'What is English Literature?', in *Lectures in America* (New York: Modern Library Inc., Random House, 1935), (this edition, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1967, p. 53). For a discussion of Stein's autobiographical narratives, see Shirley C. Neuman, *Gertrude Stein: Autobiography and the Problem of Narration* (Victoria, BC: English Literary Studies, University of Victoria, 1979). Susanna Egan points out that Stein introduced the inter-subjective model of autobiography in *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*; see her 'Encounters in camera: autobiography as interaction' in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 40, no. 3 (Fall 1994), p. 598.



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The themes of repetition and disembodiment fold together in Woodman's frequent visual explorations of the relationship of self-portrayal to the photographic conditions of reproducibility, and are perhaps most explicitly staged in one of her little-discussed photographs made at RISD between 1975 and 1978 (fig. 5.2).<sup>5</sup> Three naked female figures are pictured grouped together in the corner of her studio space: two of them stand close together on the left, both striking a similar pose, leaning slightly to the right with their backs against the duo-tone wall. Just offset, a third figure on the right protrudes further into the foreground space, turning her body as if to mirror the twisted poses of the figures on the left. Each of the three hides her face behind a photographic print of Woodman's own unsmiling face in close-up, the specificities of the models' own features subsumed by the repeated image.

Capturing the artist's performative act of hiding each of her models' identities with her own self-image, this photograph seems to condense within its frame a theme played out extensively throughout Woodman's body of work as a whole. In this image identity is hidden and subject identifications unstable, the boundaries of Self and Other overlaid, supplanted, and confused. By repeating the image of her own face four times across the photographic field, Woodman directs focus onto herself, an excessive presence offering up the misleading promise of some kind of truth about the artist's own subjectivity.

Throughout the nearly six hundred photographs produced by Woodman during her short career, the deceptive promise of access to an elusive subject is played out by her

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<sup>4</sup> See Neuman, *Gertrude Stein*, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Little attention has been paid to this photograph in the existing literature on Woodman's work. In Jen Budney's essay included in the exhibition catalogue *Francesca Woodman* (Modena: Galleria Civica, 1996), she notes that the photograph is well worked-out formally, and suggests that the three masks worn by the women are over-exposed, "all dark eyes", whilst the one pinned to the wall is not, and so appears "more immediate" or life-like (p. 15). It might be interesting to consider this apparent fading out of the image as the visual depiction of photographic reproducibility: evocative of a repetitious, mechanised form of reproduction from which the subject becomes further and further displaced, this fading seriality might evoke the notion of a waning, disappearing subjectivity. Of all the literature which mentions this work, only Harm Lux has noted the way in which the idea of multiplicity is explored; as he notes, the serial exposure of Woodman's face here suggest "identity and exchangeability", as the repetition of bodies and faces give the impression that Woodman might be "on the point of slipping into other bodies." See Harm Lux, 'Roads of Access to Francesca Woodman's Work', in the exhibition catalogue *Francesca Woodman, Photographische Arbeiten/Photographic Works* (Zurich: Shedhalle & Münster: Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1992), p. 18.



seemingly obsessive recourse to self-portrayal. So often was Woodman herself the subject of her work, the body of photographs left by the artist is haunted by her presence, as her image is doubled or serially reproduced, albeit often blurred to indistinction, fractured and dismembered through framing, or hidden in shadowy recession. But closer inspection reveals that whilst Woodman is clearly the model for a great number of these images, there are at least as many instances in which she used other women as her subjects.

Just as the images of Woodman herself cannot be interpreted as simple self-portraits, neither can her photographs of others be considered a project of portraiture. Functioning as substitute selves—what Abigail Solomon-Godeau has called ‘doubles’, or ‘stand-ins’—Woodman’s models are the vehicles for a kind of half-hidden self-representation, reminiscent of Stein’s appropriation of Alice Toklas’ subjectivity as a device of veiled self-portraiture.<sup>6</sup> By always displacing herself from her imagery, Woodman’s photographs accumulate to form a project of anti-self-portraiture, as if concerned instead with the expression of some kind of shared subjectivity. Evidenced in the way Woodman manipulated the features of her various models to force a fleeting, deceptive resemblance to herself, the artist’s project of seeming self-representation is interpreted by Solomon-Godeau as an artistic staging of her own “theater of the feminine self”.<sup>7</sup> By obscuring features, cropping heads, and blurring the details that might betray individuality, Woodman’s photographic techniques work to deny the specificity of each female presence, promoting a kind of generalised, non-specific and ambiguous feminine subjectivity from which the ties of identity are cut loose.

But in this shot, each female subject is related explicitly to Woodman’s own identity, as they are masked with the image of her face. The apparently narcissistic terms of this self-reflection in the faces of her models is described by Sloan Rankin, Woodman’s close friend and most-often photographed model, who appears in this shot on the far left. She has described the frustration Woodman could not hide when using her as a model, and suggested that the artist was never really happy with the resulting prints. As

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<sup>6</sup> Whilst Abigail Solomon-Godeau does not make reference to this photograph, she does recognise the way that Woodman used female models throughout her photographic practice. See ‘Photography: Our Bodies, Our Icons’ in *Vogue* (February 1986), p. 98. See also Solomon-Godeau’s ‘Just Like a Woman’, in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Solomon-Godeau, ‘Photography: Our Bodies, Our Icons’, p. 98.

she put it, Woodman “wanted me to look like her own body. She was immortalizing her own body through me in some vicarious way”.<sup>8</sup> Woodman shrouded her models beneath an obsessively self-referential visual language in which identity was made ambiguous — in many photographs it is impossible to tell Woodman and Rankin apart, and consequently some have been interpreted wrongly as self-portraits. As her model pointed out, this was no accident. By manipulating light, costume, and framing, Woodman somehow “managed to make [Rankin’s] features photograph like her own”.<sup>9</sup>

So, whilst there can be no doubt that Woodman’s almost exclusive representation of women seems obsessed with the exploration of a shared feminine subjectivity at a general level, the way in which she chose her models and staged them in conjunction with her own body or own self-image draws each of her ambiguous subjects into a network of intimate relationships.<sup>10</sup> Usually close friends and colleagues at RISD seemingly chosen for their physical resemblance to the artist herself, Woodman’s models are not simply generic feminine types, but explicitly chosen to function as her own doubles, as othered selves. As Otto Rank noted in his psychoanalytic study of the function of the ‘double’ in literary narrative, the act of representing one’s own double can be indicative of a subconscious desire to explore the relation of the self to the self, a tool of self-expression which makes possible the visualisation of the split or cleavage in the ego. This split of the subject into observing self and its corresponding shadow or reflection is itself evocative of the necessary division of selfhood undergone in the moment of the photographic self-portrait, an objectification to which Woodman makes reference in her inclusion within the final print of a number of ‘straight’ self-portraits. But there is a sense in which the idea of the othered, alienated self embodied by the figure of the double is also addressed through the process of masking, which Woodman makes explicit in her act of masking the models for this image.

But not only does Woodman use her own imaged face as the masking device through which each of her model’s identity is hidden, she also includes other references to her own determinate selfhood. The girlish details of the clothing retained by the figure on

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<sup>8</sup> See Sloan Rankin’s essay, ‘Francesca Woodman, Voyeurism among Friends’, in Gerard Malanga (ed.), *Scopophilia: The Love of Looking* (New York: Alfred van der Marck Editions, 1985), p. 119. This essay was written shortly after Woodman’s death in 1981.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> At various points throughout her career, Woodman did take a number of photographs of male subjects, usually friends and family; however, these examples are relatively scarce in comparison with the extensive body of photographs which picture herself or other female subjects.



the right denote Woodman's presence within the image, the black slippers and long white socks being recurring elements of her own idiosyncratic style of dress frequently included in her photographs. So often does Woodman retain these items of clothing whilst otherwise naked, their inclusion here as markers of her own subjectivity seems too pointed to be overlooked. By insisting on her presence in this image of disguised and otherwise unidentifiable figures, Woodman makes explicit her interest in the relationship of Self to Other performed in her acts of masking, and the emphasis on these relationships is heightened by the settings Woodman chose. Placed in close proximity, the figures are contained by a network of vectors formed by the converging lines of the skirting and floor boards, behind a closed door. The square frame of the photograph adds to this sense of enclosed interiority, producing the effect of a contained, domestic space of faded décor and ebbing grandeur. The markedly homely setting provides the backdrop for Woodman's staging of the intimate relationship of vicarious selves. By picturing herself—as an Othered, veiled and covert subjectivity—with Others, within this desecrated domestic interior, Woodman's photograph introduces a compelling focus on the relationships of self and other, of artistic subject and photographic object, conjuring the psychoanalytic terms of inter-subjective exchange.

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Since the 1970s, a strand of psychoanalytic discourse informed by feminism has concerned itself with the idea of inter-subjectivity, and is best exemplified in the work of Jessica Benjamin, who has rooted her theorisation of subject-formation in the notion of inter-subjective exchange. Based on a re-configuration of a traditional psychoanalytic mapping of subjectivity dependent upon the internalisation, repression, objectification and evacuation of maternal subjectivity, Benjamin's theory re-thinks the model of psychic individuation predicated on subject-object relations. Positing the idea of a dynamic subject-subject interaction, Benjamin's theory reclaims the role of the mother as active and desiring subject.<sup>11</sup> This process of reciprocal interaction provides

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<sup>11</sup> See Jessica Benjamin's *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1995) for her discussion of subject formation. Reclaiming the subjectivity of the mother through her model of exchange, Benjamin points out the ways in which the maternal subject is lost in traditional psychoanalytic discourse; for example, she cites the infantocentric focus of object-relations theories, dependent on the pathologisation of the maternal subject. Those theories of individuation in which the mother becomes a mere object to be internalised suppress, or refuse to recognise, the active role of mothering, denying the processes of engagement, connection and



a time and space in which both mother and infant become entwined within a network of mutual moments of both identification and necessary denial, of recognition and refusal. By offering the possibility of a subject recognisant of the existence of Others as whole subjects—speaking, desiring others—rather than projected selves or objects made use of in intra-psychic models of subject-formation, this theory recognises the subject's ability to appreciate the other as an other subject.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, this model's potential rethinking of the maternal dyad offers up a useful tool for a feminist reconsideration of psychoanalytic discourse, but my interest lies in the way Benjamin claims a place for these moments throughout life, as persistent moments of encounter in which subjectivity is constantly negotiated and re-negotiated, affirmed in the mutuality of inter-subjective exchange. When thinking about Woodman's photography, the terms and descriptive language used by Benjamin resonate with the medium's own language of encounter and exchange. By making an analogy between this notion of inter-subjective space, and the photographic object itself as some kind of reparative surface or moment of encounter, I want to suggest that Woodman's serial imaging of intimate, feminised relationships posed within shallow, domesticated interior spaces engender moments of viewing experience predicated on similar processes of recognition and denial, resemblance and difference, evocative of those processes through which subjectivity might be negotiated.

The psychoanalytic terms which frame Benjamin's argument at once evoke a photographic rhetoric, as her theorisation of inter-subjectivity was provoked by her re-reading of Freud's theorisation of the 'melancholic position'. Unlike the 'normal' process of mourning, in which libido is gradually detached from the mourned love-

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assertion which the child experiences in relationship to the mother as both object and other subject. Benjamin's re-consideration of maternal subjectivity resonates with Luce Irigaray's own feminist critique of psychoanalytic discourse, and offers a possible way out of those various theories in which maternal (and thus all feminine) subjectivity is objectified, pathologised or denied. See, for example, the skin theory of Didier Anzieu, which is addressed in relation to Woodman's own photographic exploration of the skin in the second chapter of this thesis. Benjamin's idea of the inter-subjective space of encounter might offer up an alternative conception of the skin as a reparative space of mutual identification, sensation and knowledge.

<sup>12</sup> In the introduction to *Like Subjects, Love Objects* Benjamin describes the way in which she attempts to hold various models of subject-formation in tension rather than replacing one with another. By maintaining this fluidity, Benjamin makes possible a creative and suggestive use of various psychoanalytic theories, and the way in which she points out similarities in theories usually deemed disparate also creates a kind of critical distance from the traditionally masculine-dominated psychoanalytic discourse which her own theory disputes. By acknowledging each theory's merits and points of contention, Benjamin makes clear the discursive and narrative structures through which psychoanalytic positions are maintained.



object to be displaced in time onto a new one, for the melancholic subject this freed libido becomes lodged deep within the self. As it becomes withdrawn into the ego, it establishes a process through which the ego becomes identified with that lost object, as the object-loss experienced in the duration of mourning becomes mutated to promote a devastating sense of ego-loss. As Freud described it, the abandoned lost object leaves the trace of its absence, in the moment in which “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego”.<sup>13</sup> Imagining the ego as a perceptual, light-sensitive surface, Freud’s description of this psychic structure brings to mind the sensate surfaces of photography, those planes covered in light-sensitive salts onto which a material object’s shadow is cast, imprinted, and preserved. But the inscription of loss upon the ego’s perceptive surface is also analogous to the way in which the subject’s shadow is recorded on the negative’s light-sensitive emulsion, the resultant positive image dependent on a moment of absence in which the material body is lost forever, persisting to haunt the photographic portrait. By theorising the way in which the subject’s ego comes itself to function like a kind of lost object, Freud’s description of the moment in which that shadowy absence is internalised suggests a profound loss of selfhood which echoes the process of self-objectification set in play in the moment of photographic self-representation.

But at the same as it represents this loss, the photographic image of the self is also always predicated on some kind of link to the original subject, as it is dependent on an indexical relationship which can never be completely ignored. In her development of Freud’s terms of description, Benjamin suggests that the shadow-space cast by the forsaken object—an ambiguous, shady, penumbral space of loss—is also one of encounter. Lingering within the dissociated ego as the imprint of the lost Other, it is in this space of interaction that subjectivity might begin to emerge. As Benjamin suggests, this ‘shadow’ can function as a useful metaphor for inter-subjectivity, as it resides between subject and object, self and other, but is dependent on both — on the object’s presence as a material referent whose indexical image is cast, and on the subject whose reception or perception of this shadow validates the original presence. As a kind of third term, this shadow-space functions for Benjamin as an in-between space, a space of passage and exchange. Neither subject nor object, self nor other, it remains embedded in psychic structures as an impression, a memory, an indexical trace. Persisting as a continual, reparative space of negotiation and reciprocity, the shadow is imagined by

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<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, (1917), in *Standard Edition of the Complete*



Benjamin as an internal mental potential space, an atemporal and suspended moment of veiled encounter from which subjectivity emerges.

Bound up within a moment of paradoxical loss and encounter, Benjamin's terms of description immediately bring to mind some of the theoretical concerns of the photographic medium, a medium dependent on temporal suspension, on memory and absence, and forever haunted by its status as indexical imprint of the material world. Forming a photographic project apparently obsessed with self-portrayal, but from which the 'self' is always somehow displaced, projected or caught in the moment of disappearance, Woodman's manipulation of the medium in her own exploration of the relationship of self to other—or of self to an othered, lost self—resonates with Benjamin's language of encounter and interaction. As both directorial eye behind the camera and the model under its gaze, Woodman herself seems to occupy this ambiguous position, as a "being outside the self", an inter-subjective position which Benjamin describes as the "third position" of "observation".<sup>14</sup> Possessed by neither subject nor object, but ultimately and intimately connected to both, this space of encounter provides the plane on which both might meet. Imagined not as a fixed space or a fixed instant in time, but as a passage, Benjamin's description of this mental space as a "field of intersection" itself brings to mind the photograph's own hazy status as a spatio-temporal disruption.<sup>15</sup> A plane of intersection, of crossing lines and meeting points, tangential vectors and loci of connections, this imaginary space could perhaps be provoked or re-awakened in the moment of spectatorial encounter. Taking up a position coincident with the one Woodman relinquished each time she posed in front of her camera, the viewing subject becomes embroiled within this moment of passage and exchange. Imagining the photograph as a similar inter-subjective space, a reparative surface and space of denial, something about the subjectivity—of both artist and viewer—is played out.

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To return, then, to the photograph under discussion, it seems obvious that in this image Woodman has used the theme of masking to act out the photographic objectification

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Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 14, p. 249.

<sup>14</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other – Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. xiii, xiv & xv.



undergone by each of her subjects in the click of her camera's shutter. Self and other become overlaid, overlapped in the act of holding up the photographic masks. Each mask's explicitly photographic nature is made clear, as the light that bounces and deflects off each print's surface draws attention to the glossy materiality of the paper. The high shine of the light skimming each of the image-masks works to paradoxically obscure what each of Woodman's 'self-portraits' promises to reveal, the very medium of photographic representation undermining its own claim to revelation. Light here seems to deflect an inquisitive gaze, denying access to the subject undergoing the act of photographic representation. As if staging the inherent othering engendered in the moment of self-portrayal, Woodman's interplay of masked self and other questions the photograph's claim to truthful representation. Diffusing any notion of a fixed, easily identifiable or locatable subjectivity, Woodman's manipulation of the idea of the self-portrait explores the protective purpose of the self-image, a function which Linda Haverty Rugg has called a "defense of the most private self".<sup>16</sup> Likening the photographic image itself to a veiled or masked face, Haverty Rugg points out how the photograph's seemingly transparent surface admits a spectatorial gaze whilst also offering a space for the subject to hide out, obscured behind the deceptive imagery recorded on the print.<sup>17</sup> Whilst the lone print pinned up on the wall on the far left of Woodman's photograph is the most traditionally self-portrait-like image included here, its bodiless suspension, the deflective glare of its surface, and its subsequent repetition across the horizontal plane of the photograph undoes its claim to any kind of indexical link to its supposed referential subjectivity. By using light as a principle of the photograph's own obscuring, Woodman plays out the self-portrait's inherently veiled text, as the blinding glare bouncing off each print's surface persists as a paradox of concomitant clarity and density, ultimately obscuring its own subject.

Deploying the same method of masking which she inflicts on the other figures, Woodman's own photographic 'self-portrait' is here the condition of her actual self-effacement: by submitting her own image to the process of masking, Woodman not only alludes to processes of objectification inherent in any act of portraiture, but also relates

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<sup>15</sup> See Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> See Linda Haverty Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves, Photography and Autobiography* (Chicago, IL & London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> See also Mary Anne Doane's interesting discussion of the cinematic trope of veiling. In her *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), Doane explores the relationship of the gaze to the representation of veiled femininity and masquerade in relation to Lacanian notions of fetishism and absence.



it to a process of specific self-portrayal. Like the mask, the photograph depends on a physical space between 'real' face and reproduced copy, the surface of the mask existing in a similarly ambiguous relationship to the material body it apes, at once intimately indexical, necessarily just-displaced. Neither photographic self-image nor physical mask can integrate fully with the body, and the visual recognition of each maintains a spatial—and thus also temporal—distinction that it simultaneously promises to overcome. By forging connections between mask and photographic print, opening up the space between self and self-image, between identity and appearance, Woodman seems to open up the unseen, always hidden space behind the mask.

This space, this discrepancy between appearance and subjectivity, has been frequently explored in the history of photography through the trope of the mask, perhaps most famously by Diane Arbus in work from the early 1970s (fig. 5.3). Using physical masks and drawn-on cosmetic marks to both hide and exaggerate the "dull-witted" features of her subjects playing in the grounds of their psychiatric hospital, Arbus questions the nature of identity assumed to be inscribed in physical appearances.<sup>18</sup> Dramatising the mask-like surface of the face itself, the mask re-conceals the body's own façade, that surface through which classification is fixed, identity proscribed, stereotype configured.<sup>19</sup>

Woodman's own use of the mask as a photographic prop does not engage with such a questioning of cultural inscriptions, her focus being more on the constructions of identity forged in the inter-subjective relationships that she stages. Her use of the mask has echoes of an earlier photographic series, which unlike Arbus' photographing of the Other, centres on the representation of kinship and familial groups, each member of which is physically masked. Produced in the late 1950s and 1960s by Magnum photographer Inge Morath in collaboration with the artist Saul Steinberg, in this extensive series the subjects are pictured in the domestic spaces of affluent New York society — in the ornate parlour of a family home, the informal sitting-rooms of social

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<sup>18</sup> See Mary Price's discussion of photographic masking in *The Photograph, A Strange, Confined Space* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 124.

<sup>19</sup> For an interesting discussion of the way in which Arbus represents 'difference' and 'sameness', see Carol Armstrong's essay 'Biology, Destiny, Photography: Difference According to Diane Arbus' in *October* 66 (Fall 1993). See also Diane Arbus, *Untitled: Diane Arbus* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995); Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus* (London: Heinemann, 1984); Doon Arbus & Marvin Israel (eds), *Diane Arbus* (London: Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1978); and Doon Arbus (ed.), *Diane Arbus* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1972)



gatherings, or kitchens, balconies and back-yards (figs. 5.4 & 5.5).<sup>20</sup> Each wears a hand-made mask onto which exaggerated and abstracted facial expressions are painted, fixing their expressions in grimaces of feigned delight or stern concentration as if to ape the way in which a subject might pose for a party snapshot or a formal family portrait. According to Morath, her caricatured subjects were each “impersonating an archetype”, archetypes which hide the ‘reality’ of their identity as they remained essentially “illegible documents”.<sup>21</sup> For Morath and Steinberg, identity was performative, and the artists collaborated to manipulate the relationship between each model and their mask as the medium through which they explored a set of questions; namely, “Who am I impersonating today?”, “Which face do I wish to show the world” and “Under what mask do I want to hide?”<sup>22</sup>

For these artists, social identity was imagined to function as a kind of mask, a performative surface identity that is always assumed and imitative, a false projection under which a ‘real’ or ‘essential’ subjectivity is assumed to be hidden and protected. At various points in her career Woodman rehearsed the trope of masking, occasionally masking the subjects of some of her ‘portraits’. Actual masks were used as props to hide (usually male) models’ faces, as seen in a very early photograph taken in Boulder, Colorado between 1972 and 1975, long before she enrolled in her undergraduate program at RISD (fig. 5.6). The rabbit mask hides the model’s face, echoing the way in which the stark contrast of bright sunlight and deep shadow both reveals and conceals his body, seemingly slipping into the wall of the house. In the later body of fashion-oriented work taken in New York after graduation, the idea of veiling is frequently alluded to. In a shot from 1979, the model’s features are just discernible beneath the diaphanous fabric of the embroidered scarf pinned across her face (fig. 5.7).<sup>23</sup> In these examples Woodman uses the veil and the mask to pose questions about identity, as the photographs become metaphoric surfaces of ambiguous and unstable subjectivity.

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<sup>20</sup> Many of Morath’s photographs were included in Steinberg’s *Le Masque*, a collaborative project published in 1966 (Paris: Maeght Editeur). See also Kurt Kaindl (ed.), *Inge Morath Fotografien 1952-1992*, (with texts by Inge Morath and Margit Zuckriegl) (Salzburg: im Otto Muller Verlag, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Inge Morath, in her essay ‘Photographing Saul Steinberg’s Masquerade’, which appears in a new collection of the photographs she made for Steinberg’s original book, entitled *Saul Steinberg Masquerade, Photographs by Inge Morath* (London: Viking Studio, Penguin Books Ltd., 2000) (unpaginated).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> This photograph forms part of the body of fashion-related photographs Woodman made living in New York City after graduating from RISD in 1978 in order to secure a position as a photographer’s assistant. Woodman used young would-be fashion models, giving them her prints in return for sitting for her (information supplied by George Woodman, in conversation with the author, New York, April 2002).



Rather than using the trope of masking as a means to pose critical questions about the ways in which socialised identity is acquired, Woodman seems more concerned with exploring the connections and distinctions staged between self and other materialised through the performative acts of creating her photographs, and the subsequent moment of the viewing encounter.

As physical masks were usually reserved for photographing others, Woodman's act of self-masking lends fig. 5.2 a unique sense of purpose, indicative of a desire to explore the process of self-othering which she usually performed through the medium itself. By manipulating light to blur her form into indistinction, or by adjusting her camera and shifting her position in order to cut out her face in the moment of framing the image, Woodman re-stages the photograph's characteristic operation of self-alienation as a performative act.<sup>24</sup> In fig. 5.2, by staging an interplay between a fractured and veiled self, and a masked Other, within the photographic language denoted by the repeated prints, Woodman's shot hinges on questions of inter-subjective identifications, the tension between recognised sameness and difference through which subjectivity is negotiated. By masking her own face with her own image, Woodman stages self-displacement, her own subjectivity infiltrated by an operation of deferral.

But more than just displacing identity, the mask, as David Napier has pointed out, is bound up with phantasies of transformation, rites of passage and moments of transition. It has a fetishistic appeal hinged on a moment of ambivalent reception, the sight of an object of uncertain status that testifies to "an awareness of the ambiguities of appearance".<sup>25</sup> Concealing appearances beneath its apotropeic surface, the mask's own fixed and imitative features obscure a hidden identity, an identity that is imagined to be in flux. The performative act of masking provokes a process in which not only does identity become unhitched from appearance, but it becomes suspended in a temporal flux, a moment of recognition and questioning dependent on reception which could be described as a kind of inter-subjective encounter. Hovering in front of each of her models' faces, Woodman's photographic masks function as such symbolic surfaces of instability and transformation, both hiding and highlighting the processes of objectification set in play in the instant of the shutter's click. But Woodman also seems

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<sup>24</sup> These themes are addressed in the preceding chapters of my thesis.

<sup>25</sup> See A. David Napier's extensive anthropological study of masks in *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox* (Berkeley, CA & London: University of California Press, 1986), p. xxiii.



to allude to the subsequent moment of reception, for each of the figures holds her own mask in her hand, clutching the print in a way that seems to predict the manner in which the photograph itself might later be examined. Invoking a moment of haptic communion through an appeal to both vision and to a physical sense of touch, Woodman's act of masking seems to interpellate the spectator, drawing that subject into the encounter.<sup>26</sup>

As well as providing a sense of intimate connection, by holding the print in front of their real faces, these figures draw attention to the space between the two, the discrepancy between reproduced image and 'real' face. Played out across the image, the fourfold seriality of Woodman's self-imaging builds a repetitious logic which itself becomes another mechanism of masking, alluding to the endless reproducibility of the photographic image, an infinite potential that whilst offering up a space of serial self-imaging suited to a subjectivity produced in multiplicity, also serves as a principle of displacement. Each of Woodman's 'self-portraits', each copy, casts the shadow of doubt over the original or truthful referent, peeling away the photograph's promise of a laminate relationship to its intimate correlate in the material world. By repeating her image across the photograph, Woodman makes explicit its status as a copy displaced from the material body, opening up the space between index and referent, here symbolised by the gap between imaged mask and the details of physical appearance.

It is in this repeated deferral and self-displacement that my interest lies when considering how Woodman used the mask not merely as a figurative device that puts under pressure questions of identity and appearance, but as a tool of self-concealment which is the visual re-enactment of a process inherent in any project of repeatedly photographing the self. Across the square format of this frame, each printed face is different, fading in and out of view. The print Woodman holds up to her own face appears larger, as if taken at closer range, or selectively enlarged, whilst the images held by her models betray a slightly longer shot. The photograph covering the face of the model on the left is dog-eared and crumpled, slightly blurred and held at a skewed angle. Fixed to the wall behind the figures, the fourth print includes more of the background and more of Woodman's clothed body. This image, although obscured by a degree of surface reflection, appears to be more focused. If we 'read' the whole print

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<sup>26</sup> I discuss Woodman's appeal to the viewer's sense of touch in order to provoke the fantasy of haptic

from left to right, Woodman's image becomes degraded, buckled, unfocused and bleached out, as the serial shots play out a gradual loss of the photograph's 'ideal' state of technical perfection. As if coming in and out of focus, Woodman's variable image is manipulated to stage a shifting display of difference and dissimilarity that unhinges the photograph from its claim to truth, by placing emphasis on the paper print's fragile relationship to the material object it appears to reproduce.

But as well as pointing out the fallacy of the claim that the camera never lies, there is also the sense in which the fact of repetitious imaging itself functions as another kind of masking device. By hiding the real face with the photographically reproduced image of that face, Woodman seems to suggest that in that process of reproduction, something about identity is lost. As the print casts its shadow over her face, echoing the way in which the positive image is produced through the inversion of the shadow falling on the light-sensitive surface of the negative, Woodman's act of masking both hides and reveals the liminal and unknowable space between the two. By drawing attention to that gap, evocative of the fact of displacement on which photographic representation depends, the repeated images that fracture the frame of the shot also fracture the artist's self and body, self and image. Engendered through Woodman's re-staging of the repetition at the heart of the photographic medium, the photographer's subjectivity becomes fragmented through the principle of seriality.

Woodman's self-masking here invokes the act of literary veiling employed by Gertrude Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*: as Carolyn Faunce Copeland points out, by taking Alice's voice as the othered medium through which she spoke, Stein created for herself a "narrative mask", a literary veil which disguised her own identity as the writer became hidden behind the mask of the "not-me".<sup>27</sup> But whilst Woodman's photographic masking could be imagined as a similar form of veiled autobiography, I would like to suggest that it is the repetition at the heart of Stein's project of literary portraiture that better resonates with Woodman's photography. By turning her pen to other people and other objects, Stein developed a style of language marked by repeated words and doubled phrases, her fractured syntax producing the effect of echoes and verbal shadows.

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communion in relation to one her unpublished artist's books in the previous chapter of this thesis.

<sup>27</sup> See Carolyn Faunce Copeland, *Language & Time & Gertrude Stein* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1975), pp. 135-137.



In one of Stein's portraits entitled 'Preciosilla', written in 1926, this strategy of repetition is clearly evident, as the rhyming words and repeated vowels and consonants mutate and shift, meaning becoming unfixed through the writer's manipulation of the echoing sounds. For example, in the second paragraph Stein wrote:

"Bait, bait tore, tore her clothes, toward it, toward a bit, to ward a sit, sit down in, in vacant surely lots, a single mingle, bait and wet, wet a single establishment that has a lily lily grow. Come to the pen come in the stem, come in the grass grown water."<sup>28</sup>

Verbs are fractured and repeated: 'tore' becomes stretched out as 'toward', before being cut in half, split to form the infinitive 'to ward'. Meaning becomes gradually lost, or unstable, and the repetition of the sounds drives the text in a rhythmic movement. Stein described the development of this literary style in an essay from 1935 entitled 'Portraits and Repetition', in which she recalled the way in which her portraits were written, or "made", or "felt".<sup>29</sup> 'Portraits', rather than mere 'description', Stein's sketches are displaced from their subjects, as she moved away from a purely descriptive language, using repeated fragments to convey each subject's 'entity' rather than a simple notion of identity.<sup>30</sup> This process was bound up with the temporality of the text: to capture each subject, Stein used language as a tool to suggest an ongoing temporal moment, which she described in her 1926 essay 'Composition as Explanation' (in which the portrait Preciosilla was included) through the idea of the 'continuous present'. Not merely a suspended or 'prolonged present', the continuity of this moment was produced through Stein's use of verbs and repeated sounds, describing the moment of the act of portraiture as one which is always "beginning again and again".<sup>31</sup> As if recreating over and over the instant, the split second in which her composition was 'felt', Stein described her notion of the continuous present as "a beginning again and again and again and again, it was a series it was a list it was a similarity and everything different it was a distribution and an equilibration".<sup>32</sup> Similar but different, both sequential lists and interconnected and inextricably linked series, Stein's portraits are marked by repetition, echoing verbal shadows and fluidly progressive yet internally fractured sentences.

<sup>28</sup> 'Preciosilla', included in Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1926)

<sup>29</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'Portraits and Repetition', in *Lectures in America*, p. 165.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 168, and see Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: the Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 42-45.

<sup>31</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation*, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

As she read Stein's literature throughout her life, Woodman was highly likely to have read this essay, and was certainly aware of Stein's portraits, as the snippets of her imitative style of writing are driven by similarly fragmentary and repeated elements. In *Poem about 14 hands high*, a poem Woodman ghost-wrote for her colleague Sloan Rankin who was taking a poetry class in their first year of study at RISD, the artist's personal 'Stein-writing' is evident in her use of verbs and repetition.<sup>33</sup> Woodman wrote:

i am apprehensive.<sup>1</sup> it is like when i  
played the piano.<sup>2</sup> first i learned to  
read music<sup>3</sup> and then at one point i  
no longer needed to translate the notes:  
they went directly to my hands.<sup>4</sup> After a  
while i stopped playing<sup>5</sup> and when i  
started again i found i could not  
play. i could not play by  
instinct<sup>6</sup> and i had forgotten how  
to read music.<sup>7</sup>

The rhythmic repetition is most evident in the use of the word 'play', as it recurs throughout the text, particularly in the echoing lines "... i found i could not play. i could not play ...". But as well as directly inspiring such examples of Woodman's derivative and playful literary experiments, it is possible that Stein's apparently obsessive strategy of repetition may have been the source of the artist's fascination with the possibilities offered by serial imaging, which she explored visually through the endlessly reproducible potential of the photographic medium. Throughout her career Woodman pushed the limits of the single shot, and the body of photography she produced is haunted by echoing, recurring motifs, often organised within sequential formats, or serially conceived as 'sets', many of which integrate and overlap. A number of Woodman's photographs have been collected together within the pages of her numerous artist's books, as she glued them in place to create connections and relationships that drive a sequential flow. Some of these books were later taken apart and re-ordered, as the artist fractured the continuity of the form, choosing to leave some

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<sup>33</sup> Sloan Rankin included this poem in her essay about Woodman which was included in Hervé Chandès (ed.), *Francesca Woodman*, (Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain & Zurich-Berlin-New York: Scalo, 1998), p. 36. Woodman later took the lines 'and then at one point i/ no longer needed to translate the notes:/ they went directly to my hands' and wrote them on one of her photographs, which is discussed in the second chapter of this thesis.



images in place, whilst extricating others in order to construct alternative sequences.<sup>34</sup> With no direct narrative thrust or linear logic, Woodman's serial accumulations differ from the photographic narratives produced by contemporary Duane Michals, and suggest that to her, repetition and seriality were as much about fracturing and disorder as progression and fixed sequential direction. The fluid, unfixed and internally fragmented nature of Woodman's sequences has more in common with the work of Meatyard, another photographer obsessed both with serial form, and with the trope of masking.

Meatyard's quirky photographic style and eccentric individuality appealed to Woodman's own highly subjectivised exploration of the medium, and his manipulation of light and blurring in his narrative scenarios and staged photographic fictions are elements co-opted in Woodman's own performative photographs. Although Woodman's enclosed settings and emphasis on female groupings is reminiscent of Inge Morath's series of masked portraits, Woodman's repetitive staging of Self and Other demonstrates a concern for the photographic conditions of masking foregrounded in a contemporaneous series by Meatyard, which was published in 1974.<sup>35</sup>

Meatyard was himself a visual artist who found motivation in literary sources, and his library contained a copy of Stein's *Lectures in America*, in which the essay 'Portraits and Repetition' was much annotated. Barbara Tannenbaum suggests that this essay might have been a literary source for an extensive series made by Meatyard between 1968 and 1971.<sup>36</sup> Whilst throughout his career Meatyard had frequently used the mask as a prop, often worn by his own children in order to evoke ambiguous states of youthful playfulness and grotesque unidentifiable threat, in this series it became the central device driving the narrative.<sup>37</sup> Made up of sixty-three black and white

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<sup>34</sup> Some of the books, which have now been digitally archived, have a number of photographs missing. On these pages, the remains of glued corners are visible, evidence of the way in which the artist had at some point ripped the image out to perhaps re-situate it elsewhere within another context.

<sup>35</sup> In conversation (New York, April 2002), George Woodman offered Meatyard's name as an example of a photographer in whom Francesca Woodman was interested; both photographers shared an interest in manipulating light to create blurred effects, a photographic technique also frequently explored by Duane Michals.

<sup>36</sup> See Barbara Tannenbaum's catalogue essay 'Fiction as a higher truth: the photography of Ralph Eugene Meatyard', in *Ralph Eugene Meatyard – An American Visionary* (Akron, OH: Akron Art Museum & New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 49, n. 87.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 39. Tannenbaum discusses Meatyard's earlier explorations of the trope of masking in which he used his own children as his models to pose questions about identity, and reproduced a quote from the artist, in which his interest in identity and appearance is revealed: Meatyard wrote: "Our ritual face is not the person we 'really' are, but rather the image we want other people to have of us, our persona, the mask



photographs, *The Album of Lucybelle Crater* was published posthumously in 1974 in the grouping Meatyard had selected himself.<sup>38</sup> Each shot shows Meatyard's wife Madelyn posed with friends and family members, in markedly domestic settings – leaning over a new much-prized car, posed in a backyard, or strolling in a suburban park (see for example figs. 5.8-5.10). Meatyard's choice of homely feminised spaces as backdrops for the staging of familial relationships and kinship networks brings to mind Woodman's own evocation of the domestic spaces and confined interiors in which inter-personal dramas are played out.<sup>39</sup>

Whilst the setting for Woodman's photograph (fig. 5.2) is her own studio, a professional artist's space, its humble ordinariness and decrepit shabbiness lends it a domestic character, and her manipulation of the models' poses—uncomfortable and slightly awkward—evokes the staged quality of the family photograph, an effect which Meatyard reproduced throughout his series. Facing the camera, each of Meatyard's models is posed to evoke the style of the family album, inscribing his photographic series within a feminised and domesticated conceptual framework of subject-formation.<sup>40</sup> But unlike the family album in which hereditary likeness and shared memories are recorded for posterity, the identity of each of Meatyard's characters is hidden by the masks they wear. Madelyn's face is subsumed beneath an over-sized witch's or crone's mask, a mask of pronounced and grotesque age, whilst the shifting identities of her changing companions are blurred by the flaccid and sagging lines of a rubbery translucent mask.

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we wear, the role we want to play.” (p. 43). The themes of masking, performativity and the production of persona read through visual appearances seem well suited to the photographic medium that Meatyard exclusively used.

<sup>38</sup> The series has recently been republished in its original format in James Louis Rhen (ed.), *Ralph Eugene Meatyard: The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater and Other Figurative Photographs* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> Whilst it is known that Woodman admired Meatyard's work, it is improbable that she was aware of their shared interest in Stein's literature.

<sup>40</sup> In her interesting discussion of this series, Marianne Hirsch uses a Lacanian framework to explore the network of familial gazes which Meatyard's work both draws on and re-stages. By interpellating the viewing subject within the pages of this fabricated family album, Meatyard's album is interpreted by Hirsch as a device through which identity is questioned, imbricating the subjectivity of the spectator within the mire of familial gazes through which subjectivity undergoes constant processes of reciprocal negotiation. Suggesting generational continuity, the repetition of the feminine name reinforces the centrality of the maternal subject evoked by the feminised mask he chose as the prop for the character played by his own wife. See *Family Frames, Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1997).



Unlike Woodman's naked models, whose identities are subsumed by the generality of the unclothed body, Meatyard's characters remain clothed. But rather than vesting them with some semblance of individuality, their own changing clothing seems to heighten the way in which they become interchangeable, unidentifiable, and reduced to a logic of sameness which is precipitated by the act of repetitive imaging. The reduction of difference to a procession of sameness is reinforced by the album's title, which takes as its literary source Flannery O'Connor's 1953 short story entitled 'The Life you Save Might be your own'.<sup>41</sup> A tale of deception, in the story a mother and daughter, both of whom are named Lucynelle Crater, are duped by an avaricious drifter who comes knocking on the door of their rural home. O'Connor's repetition of the first name frames a maternal lineage, and also functions as a kind of mask, concealing trans-generational difference, her two female characters becoming a fractured or doubled single subject rather than maintaining distinctive subject positions.

In the story, the rootless tramp calls himself Mr Shiftlet, a name which reflects his own fluctuating identity, to which he himself draws the women's attention in a subsequently unheeded warning. He points out the arbitrary act of naming, the way in which the act of classifying a subject offers a seductive promise of the truth or essence of a subject, but which is always a tempting but unfounded fallacy. With a sly look, Shiftlet states:

"I can tell you my name is Tom T Shiftlet and I come from Tarwater, Tennessee, but you never have seen me before: how you know I ain't lying: how you know my name ain't Aaron Sparks, lady, and I come from Singleberry, Georgia, or how you know it's not George Speeds and I come from Lucy, Alabama, or how you know I ain't Thompson Bright from Toolafalls, Mississippi?"<sup>42</sup>

The 'truth' of identity is bound up with the act of recognition and the signifying system of naming, which as Mr Shiftlet's own name suggests, is a structure built on unstable foundations.

O'Connor's choice of fictional name is appropriated by Meatyard as a tool through which the problematic relationship of resemblance to 'truth' and identity within photographic representation is explored. Meatyard takes the name, subtly changes it,

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<sup>41</sup> O'Connor's story, 'The Life you Save Might be your own', was written in 1953 and originally published in 1955 in the collection entitled *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. This edition was published under the title *A Good Man is Hard to Find: Stories*, and is introduced by Lisa Alther (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1980).



and uses it to name the possessive subject of his fictional album. The album belongs to Lucybelle, and Lucybelle is the only consistent subject represented throughout the series. Meatyard made this explicit in the captions he wrote to accompany the first and last shots of the series: the first one (fig. 5.9) reads 'Lucybelle Crater and her 46-year-old husband Lucybelle Crater', the final one (fig. 5.10) 'Lucybelle Crater and close friend Lucybelle Crater in the grape arbor'.<sup>43</sup> The feminine name is appropriated across gender lines, and constructs the varying characters of the series within an economy of sameness or self-identity, bearing the same name as both the central imaged figure, and the unseen imaginary subject believed to have collected, held, and loved the resulting album.<sup>44</sup>

What interests me about Meatyard's series in relation to Woodman's own adoption of the trope of masking is the way in which the self is staged here. By casting his wife Madelyn in the lead role as possessor and thus suggested producer of the album format, a structure bound up with fantasies of self-construction and identity negotiation, the photographer performs a trans-gender displacement of his own artistic selfhood, an act of 'self-othering' which is played out in each frame of the series. Meatyard distances his album from a project of self-representation by giving possession of the album to the imaginary character Lucybelle, a name itself derived from another literary source, the just-altered repetition of another artist's fictional creation.

Meatyard's sequence makes this explicit, as he framed his extensive series with two instances of self-imaging. For whilst most of the photographs depict Meatyard's family members and friends, among them the writers Wendell Berry, Guy Davenport, Guy Mendes and Jonathan Williams, and the photographer Van Deren Coke as partners to the constant presence of Madelyn, on closer inspection it becomes apparent that Meatyard trained his camera on himself for the first and last shots.<sup>45</sup> In the first photograph (fig. 5.9), bearing the caption 'Lucybelle Crater and her 46-year-old

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>43</sup> As Hirsch notes, some other editions or collections of the photographs have different and additional captions, but Meatyard himself titled only these ones in the original format of the album. See Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 94.

<sup>44</sup> See Susan Stewart's discussion of the family photograph album's role in the construction of selfhood in *On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 139.

<sup>45</sup> Tannenbaum has made the interesting observation that in fact Meatyard appears a third time in the series, in a photograph of Madelyn alongside his mentor Van Deren Coke, as a shadow which falls across



husband Lucybelle Crater', Meatyard stands casually, hands in pockets, alongside Madelyn, between two trees in a hedged suburban garden. He wears the translucent mask, whilst Madelyn wears the opaque mask she subsequently wears throughout the series. The only exception is the final photograph (fig. 5.10), to which Meatyard gave the fictional description 'Lucybelle Crater and close friend Lucybelle Crater in the grape arbor'. In this shot Meatyard and his wife have swapped masks, switched positions, their changed identities subsumed beneath the rubbery surfaces of the masks.<sup>46</sup>

By staging an inter-subjective switch in the ultimate image of the series, the transgender displacement suggested in the possessive title of the album has been acted out. The numerous images between the first and last photographs then seem to become involved in this process, as if narrating a step-by-step operation in which identity becomes questioned. Repeated almost to the point of absurdity, the masks function to highlight the way in which meaning becomes detached from the appearance of identity, re-iterating the process of self-displacement which frames the series as a whole.

The faceless characters which drive the narrative of the series are thus reduced to anonymous cogs in a system of progressive displacement, analogous to the photographic operation of imaging through which Meatyard describes his own projected, objectified and fractured identity. Whilst the final photograph triumphantly re-enacts the moment of self-othering, the recurring motifs of the series as a whole inscribe a progressively claustrophobic, suffocating space in which individuality is reduced to sameness through the photographic operation of repetitive imaging.

By literally masking each of his characters, Meatyard's use of the masks as visual props makes visually obvious the repetitive structure of the series, a structure which Meatyard used to work through the photographic process of estrangement set in motion in the moment of taking the image. Although Woodman's own exploration of the trope of masking is involved with a similar set of photographic problems, in her own image (fig. 5.2) she condensed the serial format. The staging of this shot was somewhat unusual in

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his feet, a tribute made in a suitably photographic language. See Tannenbaum, 'Fiction as a Higher Truth', p. 49-50.

<sup>46</sup> As Hirsch points out, this photograph was developed posthumously, and the artist's slight frame contrasts with Madelyn's relative bulky size, indicative of the cancer and treatment that killed him. As it was only developed after his death, Meatyard's presence is all the more haunting, his face made fluid and ephemeral by the mask, and the series as a whole seems to evoke a sadder tale of loss of subjectivity. See Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 99.



Woodman's practice, as the triad of female figures is in contrast to her more frequent staging of herself alone or with one other model. Perhaps, by interpreting this shot as a horizontal narrative of photographic process, Woodman's multiple figures describe a process of self-othering similar to the one Meatyard fragmented across the serial space of sixty-three shots. Relocated within the boundaries of the single shot and acted out across the individual frame, repetition, for Woodman, becomes a performative gesture.

The fact of self-repetition here constructs a space of visual excess, the multiple imaging of the artist's face across the horizontal field creating a frieze-like repetition suggestive of the open-ended and endless potentiality of the medium. But whilst offering this seemingly excessive inclusion of a single subjectivity, the repetitive device is also the means through which identity is somehow displaced. Evoking a Steinian project of portraiture, in which appearance and resemblance are divested of their role in capturing the 'essence' of a subject, Woodman unhitches the traditional self-portrait from a link to her own subjectivity.

For although Stein's portraits might at first seem to be built-up through a process of simple repetition, Stein made it clear that her portraits are actually produced out of difference, out of what she called 'insistence'. As she put it, "[t]hat is what makes life that the insistence is different, no matter how often you tell the same story if there is anything alive in the telling the emphasis is different".<sup>47</sup> Echoing with repetitive sounds, Stein's language attempts to capture what she termed the 'essence' of the subject through insistence and difference rather than resemblance. By dislocating the signifier from its referent, Stein aimed to portray each of her subjects—each 'entity'—through a process of indexical mimesis rather than description.<sup>48</sup>

By striving to achieve this kind of representation, the aim of Stein's project appears to intertwine with one of serial photographic representation, which itself promises a direct and indexical relationship to its imaged subject rather than one of mere description. Stein herself forged a link between her literary medium and the way in which photography had developed in modernity, as she related her model of 'insistence' to a cinematic model of visual temporality. Rather than referring to its status as a surface of indexical imaging, Stein instead made use of a cinematic metaphor for the operation of

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<sup>47</sup> Stein, 'Portraits and Repetition', p. 167.



‘insistence’. As Stein put it, “in a cinema picture no two pictures are exactly alike each one is just that much different from the one before”.<sup>49</sup> Produced through the accumulation of difference, the effect of the cinematic film, itself dependent on the continuous but internally fractured procession of still photographic images, echoes the temporality of Stein’s shifting, insistent portraits. Evoking each of the stills from which it is made up, but never slowing down long enough to be bound by the containing frame of the photograph itself, the film’s progression seems to produce a sense of ongoing immediacy rather than one long, suspended moment. At odds with the suspended moment seemingly recorded forever on the single photograph as a snap-shot of the past, the cinematic film’s progressive temporality becomes a more apt metaphor for Stein’s own system of modernist representation. As the fact of ‘looking’, or the description of simple ‘appearance’, was for Stein too tightly bound up with resemblance and recognition, and with memory and subjective experience in a way that brings to mind the still photograph’s terms of reference, the film’s ongoing progression was a better analogy for Stein’s attempts to capture the ‘presentness’ of the subjects under her pen.

Meatyrd’s series borrows a similarly cinematic sense of progression as a temporal framework through which the artist addressed similar ideas of resemblance and difference, as if to expose the ways in which the camera’s act of ‘looking’ and its ability to capture likeness is itself fallacious. Whilst he manipulated the album format’s link to domestic memory and identities forged through familial resemblance, the banality of the book’s repetitious format although seemingly offering ‘difference’ is actually fixed in sameness. This sameness is symbolised by the recurring masks, which, repeated 63 times over the series, seem to suspend the veil, deferring the moment of self-displacement which is the series’ ultimate end. Like a cinematic narrative, Meatyard’s series depends on the individual difference of each cell, but as a totality seems to coalesce to form a continuous narrative of identity from which difference—and so subjectivity—is somehow lost.

Woodman, however, went one step further, collapsing the strung out attenuated moment of self-objectification played out in Meatyard’s series of veiled self-representations into the confines of the cell-like space of a single image, one internally fractured by a principle of repetition. Her own act of self-estrangement in fig. 5.2 is represented

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<sup>48</sup> See Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance*, pp. 42-45.

across the field of just one frame: by positioning herself off-centre, slightly removed from the other two women (whose bodies are posed as if to double each other's presence), Woodman stages a relationship to her models that seems to play out the process of self-displacement produced in the moment in which the photograph was taken. The photographer stands as if about to take that shot, with her hands holding the printed mask as if it were a camera, positioned ready to click the shutter. As if acting out the moment of its own exposure, Woodman uses this photograph to play out the process of self-objectification. As the marked displacement of her body fractures the photographic field, Woodman appears isolated to the right of the frame, whilst the doubled forms of the two models occupy a more central band. On the left-hand side, the wall-space is almost empty, marked only by the bodiless image of Woodman's printed face pinned to the wall. By including both her face and her body, Woodman includes the suggestion of a 'whole' subject, but one which she fractures through the act of masking, a kind of splitting of subjectivity which is dramatised by the doubled bodies of her anonymous models. The bodily absence to the left of these figures further suggests the disembodiment or evacuation of a subject position provoked in the act of photographing the self, the act of self-objectification whose trace is left by the print on the wall. Its surface sheen obscures Woodman's features, as reflected light becomes more a means of obscuring than clarifying. Light, photography's medium of representation, masks its own subject.

Woodman's two models, both each other's double, also seem to function as the artist's photographic shadows, as they re-enact the process of self-doubling through which the subject becomes the object of her own dissociated gaze. The strategy of doubling engenders its own temporal fracture, a photographic 'spacing' that Rosalind Krauss has described as one of the photographic conditions of Surrealism. Doubling, in Surrealist photography, whether achieved through double exposure and multiple printing, or the manipulated effects of solarization, and selected dodging and burning, works to split the seamless spatio-temporal continuum of the print's surface, re-configuring it as a "two-step" condition, that "creates *within* the moment an experience of fission".<sup>50</sup> By destroying the singularity of the image, and so upsetting the stability of its claim to originality, the effect of doubling introduces within the single print a successive and

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<sup>49</sup> Stein, 'Portraits and Repetition', p. 176.



endless process of deferral. Setting in play a potentially infinite trace of photographic multiplicity and repetition, doubling provokes a sense of an endless “one-thing-after-another” which unhinges the registration of reality from the originary material body. Invoking Derrida’s linguistic description of the internal discrepancy of the sign, Krauss describes the way in which the seamless yet internally riven and fractured Surrealist photograph produces an interminable succession of deferrals in which reality becomes strangely dislocated, displaced by the ‘interval of a breath’.<sup>51</sup>

Woodman’s practice was deeply involved with the legacy of Surrealist photography, a conceptual and visual source that is inscribed in her sometimes derivative iconography and repetitious motifs. But rather than taking advantage of Surrealist techniques of darkroom trickery, for the most part Woodman confined her own experimental curiosity to the possibilities offered by the straight unmanipulated photograph. Unhindered by a desire for technical ‘perfection’, and untroubled by the rules of ‘correct’ lighting and exposure, Woodman’s naturally-lit exposures are characterised by blurred movement, scorched streaks of over-exposed light, and deep shadows that form banks of obscure black, the end results sometimes mimicking the effects produced by techniques made use of in Surrealist photography.

But rather than artfully contriving the effects of doubling, time and time again Woodman used herself to work through this photographic conundrum, resulting in a body of imagery crowded with the repetitive figuration of her own doubled image. Sometimes, all that she included is this double, perhaps as a dark penumbral registration of her body on a white floor (fig. 5.11), which becomes a portrait of her own shadow, her indexical inverse. In other shots, Woodman’s presence is reduced to a fleeting glimpse of her mirrored reflection, a reflection from which her physical presence is disconnected as she flees the photographic frame (fig. 5.12): becoming the flash of a moving body recorded as blurred light, Woodman draws attention to the photographic nature of her self-image. By pushing the originary body out of the frame, Woodman re-stages the way in which the photographic subject leaves her shadow on the negative, an

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<sup>50</sup> Rosalind Krauss, ‘The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism’, in *October* 19 (Winter 1981), reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1985), p. 109.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 109 ; See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (trans. Gayatri Spivak) (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), first published as *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1967).

ephemeral presence recorded as absence. Shifting her position so that she evaded representation, manipulating available light, and costume, and angles of view, Woodman pictured her own double at the cost of losing her 'self'. Making a visual re-enactment of the splitting of subjectivity engendered in the moment of the photographic shot, Woodman absented her own body in order to perform photography's alienating principle of self-doubling.

Woodman's interest in doubled forms is borne out by her use of serial imagery and repetitive iconography, and although her photographs are littered with recurring motifs and a set of familiar props which forge resonant links between seemingly disparate works, more often than not her exploration of the repetitive principle is confined to the limits of a single, unique print. Unlike Surrealist manipulative techniques, Woodman's creation of doubled effects was mostly achieved through staging and planning. In most cases Woodman only ever enlarged one carefully-crafted print from each of her well-planned negatives. Rather than taking a number of shots and picking the one she felt best captured her intentions, her painstaking method of forethought and precise sketching resulted in singular, perfectly executed shots. As a result, within Woodman's archive examples of multiple printing are extremely rare, suggesting that in those few instances in which several prints were made from a single negative something about the medium's capacity for inexhaustible repetition was being explored.

One example of this is found in a set of later photographs, made in New York around 1980 after Woodman's graduation from RISD as the preparatory studies for what would eventually become the monumental *Temple Project* series she embarked upon shortly before her death.<sup>52</sup> A single contact print made as a kind of 'study' for the series shows the photographer, alone and naked, facing her camera while holding its cable shutter release in her hand (fig. 5.13). Light lends her form a sculptural solidity, which is heightened by her adoption of a slight contra-posto stance, her weight carried on her left hip. Evocative of a marble sculpture, her flesh is rendered in a way that lends her form a classical quality, one which is developed in another print in which she appears three

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<sup>52</sup> Woodman's 'Temple Project' series was (at the time of her death) an ongoing series of monumental blueprints exploring a classical theme, and were inspired by her year spent studying in Rome as part of the RISD's European exchange programme taught in the ornate Palazzo Cenci. As a child, Woodman spent many summers in Italy, and attended an Italian school when her parents moved to Florence for a year in 1965. Although the artist's father George Woodman has donated a number of these works to the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York, due to their fragility they are currently unavailable for viewing.



times in a similar pose (fig. 5.14). Here the repetitious figures construct a frieze of naked female forms evocative of a series of caryatids, in which the framing edge of the photograph functions as the architrave, a photographic burden which slices through the artist's gaze.

Through the process of contact printing, the image's seamless surface is maintained, although internally fractured by the dark bars formed by each negative's framing edge. Suggestive of the strip format of photographic film itself, the horizontal repetition provokes a progressive movement and duration that is heightened by the rhythmic patterns and swirling wave-like stitching of the pale quilt against which Woodman poses. This undulating and eddying motion reflects the shifting stance of the imaged bodies; as the middle shot in the sequence is a reversal of the negative used in the printing of the frame on the left, the two figures mirror each other across the intersecting edge of the frame. On the right, the negative used in the printing of the isolated single contact print in fig. 5.13 has been reversed, creating a mirror image which is itself a near-perfect copy of the one used to print the two figures on the left of the frieze. In the act of flipping over each negative to form this rhythmic frieze, the connection to the reality or 'truth' of the original pose is lost. Turned over, and over again, the negative's indexical claim to its material host is dissolved, casting doubt over not only what pose or position the original one showed, but also, by extension, the very question of identity itself.<sup>53</sup>

The physical act of repeatedly flipping the negative invests the resultant print with a performative element, the trace of the necessary movement of the artist's hand in the production of the image. The photographer's material body is further invoked by Woodman's inclusion of the extended cable release, whose bulb she holds in her closed fist. Falling to the floor, the cable snakes its way toward the camera, disappearing into the imaginary space off-frame lying between the artist's body and her camera, figuring a kind of sinuous, umbilical connection.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See Rosalind Krauss' discussion of artistic originality and subjectivity in relation to Cindy Sherman's series of black and white films stills made in the late 1970s and early 1980s in 'A Note on Photography and the Simulacral', *October* 31 (Winter 1981), reprinted in Carol Squires (ed.), *The Critical Image* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1990).

<sup>54</sup> Roland Barthes takes notes of the 'umbilical' nature of light in his highly subjective reading of photography in *Camera Lucida* (trans. Richard Howard) (London: Vintage Books, 1993). I address the idea of the photograph in relation to the skin of the maternal body in the second chapter of this thesis.

Although unusual—as most of Woodman’s photographs were taken with the use of a timer, whose whirring countdown imbues many of her photographs with a performative temporality—the use of the cable release in this series is not exceptional. In one of her earliest photographs the cable release dominates the shot, held taught between the camera from the artist’s hand. Taken in 1972, *Self-Portrait at Thirteen* is one of only two photographs Woodman described as self-portraits, lending her inclusion of the connective device significance as it links her body to her camera (fig. 5.15).<sup>55</sup> But rather than offering a sense of intimate connectivity, the umbilical form of the cable here seems almost physically threatening. Looming toward the camera, the increasingly blurred wire appears to protrude like a rod from the photographer’s hand, as if aggressively to poke out the viewer’s eye which takes the place of the camera’s position. With Woodman’s own gaze and face hidden beneath a mask of thick hair, the cable release becomes a metaphor for the photograph’s own ambiguous relationship to self-portrayal, at once uniting and threatening, yet somehow filled with a suggested menace.

The mechanics of the shutter release itself heightens this ambiguity. For although it is operated by the squeeze of its soft bulb in the photographer’s hand, it is dependent on a process of disembodied and deferred action, the puff of compressed air that presses down the button itself displacing the act from the intimacy of the photographer’s own touch. Utilised in order to overcome the physical distance between photographer and camera, the compression of the bulb sets in play a temporal displacement, a split second in which artist and act are disconnected. The fact of its inclusion here as a prop within the photograph denotes this gap or space of deferral, reinforcing the way in which Woodman staged or rehearsed the detachment of ‘reality’ from its image.

As a space of deferred action and the symbol of the artist’s own alienation from self, the cable release functions as another kind of ‘mask’, but one fixed within the economy and practicalities of photography itself. Held in the photographer’s hand, it draws attention to the medium’s serial potential, the finger on the button suggesting a rapid-fire mechanical clicking of the shutter which animates the possibility of repetitive exposures

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<sup>55</sup> The other photograph given the title of ‘self-portrait’ was her *Self-Portrait Talking to Vince*, taken between 1975 and 1978, and which is discussed in the opening introduction to this thesis.



and multiple imaging.<sup>56</sup> In the triptych-like structure of fig. 5.14, Woodman plays out this repetitive potential across the internally fragmented field of a single final print, in which the 'reality' of the original gesture is lost, masked beneath the repeated surface. The cable release's metaphoric resonance within this process of repetitive and veiled self-imaging is foregrounded in the more explicit seriality of another set of photographs created by Cindy Sherman in 1976, around the time of her own graduation from her studies at the State University College of Buffalo, New York.<sup>57</sup>

Entitled *Bus Riders*, this series consists of fifteen shots, all of which include the cable release lying on Sherman's studio floor (fig. 5.16).<sup>58</sup> Like Woodman's work at RISD, Sherman's *Bus Riders* series is the work of a young photographer, and their inclusion of the cable release in the photograph itself could be read as evidence of experiment or perhaps even inexperience. But I would argue that the conscious inclusion of this element of the photograph's construction draws attention to its status as an object, evidencing a contemporary concern with the mechanics of the medium, as well as providing a means of exploring the processes of repetitive self-imaging through which the self becomes othered, alienated, as identity is played out as an endless process of serial deferment.<sup>59</sup>

Sherman's fifteen untitled black and white photographs depict the artist wearing various costumes and disguises, playing the parts of the potentially myriad characters encountered on a bus journey. Each character is shot in the same setting against the white studio wall, most of them seated on either a wooden or tubular steel chair, or as in the last shot, standing strap-hanging. In the eighth shot Sherman is seated on a high

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<sup>56</sup> Of course, in reality the film in the camera would need to be wound on between shots, or else double or multiple exposures would be produced, but I argue that it offers a sense of rapid repetition which the use of the timer would not.

<sup>57</sup> Cindy Sherman studied art at the State University College, Buffalo, New York between 1972 and 1976, roughly contemporaneous with Woodman's own undergraduate study at RISD.

<sup>58</sup> This series of photographs was originally taken and printed in 1976, but has only recently been exhibited in New York, and at the greengrassi gallery, London, in 2000. The *Bus Riders* series was published together with a contemporary series entitled *Murder Mystery People* by Glenn Horowitz Bookseller in association with D.A.P. in 2000 to accompany the exhibition. A set of each series has recently been acquired by the Tate Modern, London, where the *Bus Riders* series is on display (at the time of writing).

<sup>59</sup> Max Kozloff discusses a new generation of young photographers who were exploring the conditions of the photographic medium in his 1976 article entitled 'Photos within Photographs' published in *Artforum*, vol. 14, no. 6 (February 1976). This essay reflects contemporary theorisations of photographic practices, past and present, in which attention was deflected away from content or style, and involved itself with interpreting the photographic act – looking at photographers who were, as Max Kozloff put it, "more



stool, manipulating a sense of scale in order to invest this character with a child-like quality, her feet swinging above the floor. One 'teenage' character has turned her chair around, altering our angle of view, and lounges insolently, a cigarette held between her lips.

Each of Sherman's 'characters' were snapped in front of the same area of the studio, a continuity denoted by the double plug socket which repeatedly appears on the wall to the left of the frame, and by the masking tape markers on the floorboards that guide the placement of each figure. Whilst drawing attention to her methods of construction and preparation, Sherman's repetition of this space also lends each character a sense of inter-changeability. Rather than recording each rider on a certain bus at a distinct moment, in a certain time and place, by training her camera on the 'same' single seat, Sherman's series describes the comings and goings of different passengers as they take up and relinquish their seats on a journey across town. The narrative progression implies a changing location, a vectored temporality driven by the repetitive staging of the shots.

In each shot Sherman has disguised herself, using a range of props, cosmetics and costumes. In frames four and thirteen, she dresses up as a 'housewife', her role denoted by her paper grocery bags. The briefcase and dark glasses worn by the character in shot number ten construct 'him' as a slightly shifty businessman who won't meet our gaze. This character is preceded and followed by two student-types wearing spectacles and carrying books and notepads, in contrast to the glamour of the final character wearing a mini-skirt and fashionable platform sandals.

Sherman draws attention to the way in which these social types are self-constructed, as she takes on the roles of housewife, student, sharply dressed young man, and teenage girl. But when dressing up, Sherman constantly draws attention to the surface materiality of each disguise, exposing each stereotypical pose as a mere 'mask'.<sup>60</sup> Exaggerated cosmetic effects create mask-like faces: the dark make-up in the first shot

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involved with revealing how the photograph sees than what it sees" (p. 37). As Kozloff met Woodman sometime during the late 1970s might have had her practice in mind.

<sup>60</sup> At this point in 1970s art practice, many female artists informed by feminist theory were involved in projects in which the nature of identity and appearance were explored through costume, make-up and dress. For a survey of such practices, see Lucy Lippard's article 'Making Up: Role Playing and Transformation in Women's Art', *Ms.*, no. 4 (October 1975), reprinted in *From the Center – Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976).



sculpts a masculine bone structure and a five-o'clock shadow, whilst the second character's adolescent erupted skin is fabricated by cosmetic blemishes. Five of her characters are made up as black, described within a troubling tradition of black-face make-up which brings to the fore questions of masking and stereotype at play in the construction of identities forged in the space between Self and Other. Whilst Sherman's cast of characters may have been chosen, or imagined, to reflect the reality of racial and social diversity encountered on a cross-town bus journey in, for instance, New York in the mid-1970s, there is no attempt here to explore subjective experience or difference. By performing each character herself, Sherman's project cannot be extricated from one of self-representation, however covert. Throughout the series Sherman's characters are described within an economy of the artist's own selfhood, as she repeatedly draws attention to the artificiality of each disguise. In the sixth photograph, Sherman's own white unpainted skin is glimpsed on her upper thigh, and she has failed to paint the toenails that peep from her open shoes. In the final image, the character's mini-skirt reveals the back of one thigh, smudged with finger-marks that bear witness to the uneven application of the pigment in hard to reach areas of skin. Revealing the materiality of the cosmetic surface, Sherman constructs the relationship of identity and appearance as one of masquerade.

By masking her riders, Sherman's 'portraits' relate to an earlier exploration of this theme found in the legacy of American modernist practice. Over a number of years between 1938 and 1941, the photographer Walker Evans had made his own collection of portraits of urban travellers, a set of sixty-two black and white shots which he called 'subway portraits' (fig. 5.17). Taken over many weeks and many journeys spent underground, riding the subway cars, Evans' photographs were taken with his camera hidden in the inside pocket of his jacket, its lens peeping out from between buttons.<sup>61</sup> In contrast to Sherman's performative fictions staged inside the studio, Evans went out into the urban environment as he undertook his "hunt for a true portraiture", training his camera on the real seats opposite, hoping to capture his subjects off-guard in moments of unselfconscious reverie.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> See Gilles Mora & John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), p. 220. The authors state that Evans had cited Daumier's caricature entitled *The Third-Class Carriage* as one of the inspirations for his series.

<sup>62</sup> From the caption written to accompany the publication of a number of the portraits in *Harper's Bazaar* (March 1962), reprinted in *Walker Evans at Work* (with an essay by Jerry L. Thompson) (London: Thames & Hudson, 1982), p. 152.



Giving up his eye-view position behind the lens, Evans' directorial role was reduced to that of surreptitious rapid and repetitive shutter-clicking achieved by triggering the cable release hidden in the tube of his sleeve. Displacing his eye from its position behind the lens, the 'secret' process divested the photographer of the painstaking processes of framing and careful selection. Contrasting with the photographic portrait's usual careful planning, posing and framing, Evans' were made in blind faith, the hope of getting it just right.

What is interesting is the fact that through this means of stolen representation Evans hoped to record glimpses of the 'true' nature of his subjects when masks of socialised identity were supposedly let slip. Suspended in the liminal and transitional spaces of the subway deep in the city's bowels, spaces of relative calm and peace in comparison with today, Evans' glassy-eyed sitters were believed to be liberated from socially imposed roles. Freed from the prescriptive and fallacious masks imposed within everyday experience of contemporary society, Evans believed that in the subway-train the "guard is down and the mask is off ... people's faces are in naked repose".<sup>63</sup>

But Evans' serial act actually works to undo identity, to dissolve the 'reality' of each of his subjects. The black and white tones and shadows of fig. 5.17 configures the female subject's face as a brittle and mask-like surface, and although Mary Price has suggested that the passengers retain elements of a "stubborn individuality" as they were photographed in their own choice of clothing and contemporary dress, they are also unnamed, having become anonymous through the process of clandestine representation.<sup>64</sup> Whilst the remnants of personal style might lend each of these figures some semblance of personality, the serial format in which Evans later configured his prints systematically denudes each sitter of that individuality. In 1959 Evans mocked up a page of for a publication he intended to call *The Passengers*, and one double-page spread shows sixteen of his subway portraits, all of them shots of women's heads, each of them wearing a different hat (fig. 5.18).<sup>65</sup> Each woman is depicted from the same

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Price, *The Photograph*, p. 122.

<sup>65</sup> This book was never published; although a number of the subway portraits were finally published in the *Cambridge Review* in 1956, and in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1962, it was not until 1966 that the series was published under its original title of *Many Are Called* (this title was given by James Agee in 1940). See Mora & Hill, *Walker Evans*, p. 220.



distance as Evans sat on the seat opposite, and the convention of the portrait-like pose of the head and shoulders shot produces a sameness which is exaggerated by the format of the page. As the small black and white images are repeated across the units of the page, each rectangular cell appears like an individual frame of a reel of film. Conjuring the progression and duration of the cinematic reel, the repetition of cells drives a process through which elements of the depicted subject's individuality slip away. Identity seems to be displaced by formal repetition, as the features of each face start to dissolve into arrangements of light and dark. Although Evans described his ordinary, decent passengers as "everybody", through his process of repetitive imaging they also become 'nobody'.<sup>66</sup> The layout re-stages the repetitious principle on which the series as a whole depended, the rapid taking of photographs enabled by the disembodied action of the cable release. Whilst Evans believed his hidden camera caught his subjects unmasked, the acts of repetitious snapping and the resulting composite layout re-impose a mask, reducing individual subjectivity to the generality of the mug-shot, an 'identikit' imagery which collapses each of his subjects into unnamed indistinction.

Sherman's series seems to situate itself in this series' wake, in the troubled waters Evans stirred up in his attempt at what he termed a 'true portraiture'.<sup>67</sup> Sherman takes on this historical project, updates it and re-locates it within the specific limits of a photographic language. Visual similarities are found in some of the shots: the costume of the sullen black character in photograph 12 appears as a feminised version of one of Evans' portraits, the contrast of white scarf and dark coat exaggerated by the tonality of the black and white medium (fig. 5.19). Evans' belief that his subjects were unmasked suggests that he failed to recognise the way in which costume functions as a signifier of class, race and social position. Sherman refutes this notion: for example, the neat coat and headscarf worn by the 'housewife' in photograph 4 contrast with the more contemporary hairstyle and knee-high boots of the 'housewife' described in photograph 13. Her crumpled paper grocery bag, heavy hold-all and resigned stare lends her a world-weariness which contrasts with the primly composed neatness and self-containment of the seemingly more affluent subject of image 4.

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<sup>66</sup> In a short piece of text entitled 'Subway', Evans stated about his portraits: "[t]hese people are everybody", (reprinted in *Walker Evans at Work*, p. 161).

<sup>67</sup> From the caption in *Harper's Bazaar*, reprinted in *Walker Evans at Work*, p. 152.

But what Sherman's project makes explicit is the relationship of photographer to imaged subject, an intimate link which Evans believed his project unravelled when he occluded his own presence, imagining himself as an external and truly objective 'eye' distanced from its visual object. Sherman uses Evans' theme to frame a solipsistic act: by performing each of her anonymous characters herself, Sherman manipulates Evans' project of 'unmasked' portrayal to frame her investigation into the relationship between selfhood and identity foregrounded in the moment of photographic self-representation. Each of the characters Sherman performs is recorded as a flat print, forming a succession of artificial and shallow surfaces, the images across the series becoming like a set of masks. By using herself as her subject, a self variously masked and disguised, Sherman relates the ongoing masquerade to a project of self-portraiture missing its 'essential' subject — Sherman herself.

Everywhere in the series her presence is suggested, as her masked 'self' always makes reference to her absent position as directorial subject behind the camera within the image. The young female characters described in the final two shots actively engage the camera, the seated figure with a slightly challenging stare, the standing figure with a flirtatious, self-conscious smile. Their solicitation of the camera's gaze invokes an unseen behind-camera presence in the place of the photographer, positioned as if sitting opposite across the aisle of the bus, echoing the secretive act performed by Walker Evans. As Sherman absented this authorial position in the process of performing for her camera, the viewing subject takes up this vacated subject position, the voyeuristic position of the concealed camera.

The network of inter-subjective relationships which become entangled in the moment of self-imaging and subsequent viewing encounters are staged within a language innate to photography, a language which is made explicit here by Sherman's use of her own studio as the setting for her series. Her manipulation of light draws attention to the photographic relationship between material body and sensate negative surface. Most evident in the final shot, each of her characters is shadowed by the light which falls from right to left, casting areas of dense shadow which double the outline of the body. The repeated and pronounced silhouettes are displaced from their bodily source: projected over the blank space of the studio wall, the framed and rectangular space is



made analogous to the photographic field itself, the shadows both reproducing and displacing the subject under representation.

Like Woodman, in this series Sherman made no attempt to conceal the cord of the shutter release, in contrast to Walker Evans' concealment of his own device in the folds and creases of his clothing. Like Woodman, Sherman included the mechanism to forge a connection to her self, the subjectivity threatened in the act of photographing. Introducing an ambivalent relationship of intimacy and detachment, the alienating principle of displacement of which the cable release is both metaphor and mechanistic instigator, is embedded within the serial structure, as if hidden beneath each of her mask-like 'self-images'.

But it is also the mechanism that drives the serial logic of the work. In each shot Sherman has snapped herself caught literally in the act, her foot on the bulb as if on a pedal, accelerating the serial thrust of the sequence. Unlike the suspenseful whirring down of the timer's clock, the temporality suggested by the cable release is one marked by rapid firing, fast-shuttering, and the potential for multiple imaging and the repeated exposure of a single negative. Alluding to the possibilities of the double, or triple, or multiple exposure, the cable release's ability to fire off a quick succession of images invokes a photographic language of reproduction, displacement and doubling.

Woodman's use of the cable release in the frieze-like format of fig. 5.14 reflects this repetitive potential, as it is included here in one of her only examples of multiple printing. But whilst this print utilises a multiple format, unlike Sherman's extended and seemingly unfixed series, Woodman explores the repetitive principle within the boundaries and seamless surface of a single hermeneutic print, a single plane of paper. Although internally riven by each negative's frame, the smooth surface is maintained, in contrast to the fragmented individuality of Sherman's serial shots. Rather than offering a quick succession of separate shots, Woodman's confinement of the sequence to a single field seems to instead suspend the moment of taking, at the same time as fracturing it internally.

It is in relation to Woodman's evocation of such an ambiguous sense of time that I would like to return to Stein's literary project of repetition, to suggest that her own



project of insistent, fractured representation might have something in common with the doubled, fragmented moment staged in Woodman's photographs. In her pursuit of the ideally 'continuous' present, Stein's 'insistence', unlike the banality of simple repetition, is bound up with a language of time. Avoiding what she called the "confusion of present with past and future time" that is inevitably provoked by resemblance and remembering, Stein attempted to create a narrative which 'recreates' rather than 'remembers' what it describes.<sup>68</sup> Built-up through slight differences, Stein's literary portraits work to create what she called a "space of time".<sup>69</sup>

Whilst the notion of a 'space of time' brings to mind the strange temporal dislocation invested in the photograph, Stein's ideal of a continually re-creating moment of representation seems to be at odds with the sense of time inscribed in such a visual image. As it cuts its object from the world, recording the temporally specific moment of its exposure, the photograph keeps hold of a fragment of the past, a fragment which is haunted by its own anachronicity. As Barthes described it, the photograph records the "absolute past" of the moment of its making, and can only reveal this moment in the future, as it is inscribed with the dislocated temporality of the future anterior tense.<sup>70</sup>

Evoking a complex inter-relation of temporality, visibility and memory, the photograph functions as a drastic cut in the world's temporal fabric, recording a moment which is then paradoxically suspended, traced on the skin of the image. But perhaps there is a similar ambiguous temporality written into the Steinian portrait: for although Stein hoped to divest her portraits of a similarly nostalgic link to the past by ridding her descriptive language of the memory-filled terms of referential meaning and resemblance, there is the sense in which the strategy of repetition cannot help but suspend, rather than make continuous, the moment of representation.

The internal fragmentation of Stein's language, embedded within the rhythmic progression of the continuous narrative, works to fracture that moment. Like the condition of Surrealist doubling, Stein's own acts of modernist representation are produced through the use of a repetitive logic that constructs an ambiguous sense of temporality. By using language in ways that attempt endlessly to recreate the present,

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<sup>68</sup> Stein, 'Portraits and Repetition', p. 188; see also Neuman, *Gertrude Stein*, p. 27.

<sup>69</sup> See Stein, *Lectures in America*, p. 160.

<sup>70</sup> See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.



Stein's repetitive sounds and multiple verbs also fragment that moment, in so doing drawing attention to its status as a construct, a representational system from which its 'subject' is inevitably displaced. Drawing attention to the irrecoverable loss of that material body or subject, Stein's dislocated language is itself displaced from its own referent. Just as the photographic portrait records an essentially absented subject, Stein's literary portraits can never fully capture their own subjects.

But there is a sense that by engendering a moment of fission, Stein's language also prolongs that fractured moment of representation, drawing attention to its own attenuation in a way that refutes the notion of an ideally continuous present. As if suspending this moment, Stein's portraits conjure an ambiguous temporality which is both internally fragmented and somehow prolonged, seeming to veil her subjects. Becoming a principle of masking, Stein's style of portraiture becomes embroiled within the moment of writing, a paradoxical space of time in which the subject is hidden. It is within this confused temporal logic of concomitant fracture and suspension that Woodman's photographic exploration of repetition seems situated, as she used repetitive elements and motifs to make visible the idea, or the potential, of the photograph's infinite reproducibility. Replaying this potential within the space of a single frame, a still shot extricated from the ongoing continuity of the seriality suggested by the roll of film, Woodman's repetitive strategy hints at a similar unhinging of the photograph's temporality. Like Stein's use of fragmented and fragmenting language, Woodman's imagery might also somehow suspend the moment of the 'present', the instant of the exposure, as if overriding the temporal moment inscribed in the act of representation.

By using her own body to *perform* the act of self-doubling, or self-trebling, or the infinite potential of the photograph's reproducibility, Woodman drew attention to the duration of that action. Investing the taking of the shot with a performative gesture, of collaboration, of posing and staging, Woodman's photographic moment becomes suspended, extended. Played out across the field of the frieze-like space in fig. 5.14, this act of repetition is paradoxically condensed in another photograph taken in New York in the spring of 1980, in which two women are shown with their torsos bared, the lower halves of their bodies clothed with skirts (fig. 5.20). Another of the studies Woodman made as part of the Temple Project series, the classical theme is borne out by

the satin sheen and crisply pleated folds of the fabric, echoes of sculptural drapery. Woodman (on the left) and her double (probably Sloan Rankin) have covered their faces with the shallow boxes they hold aloft, whose surfaces are covered with an elaborate marble-patterned paper which blurs optically to create busy, statically charged areas of confused surface concealing their features. Like modern-day caryatids whose burden is the supporting of their own masks, the principle of effacement is self-imposed.

But the physical act of masking is also re-staged by Woodman's act of self-doubling, as she exaggerates the physical similarities of her own and her model's bodies displayed through their adoption of a near-identical pose. Woodman's model is her own double, her own shadow, always displaced from herself, but predicated on an indexical proximity. As if staging an inherently split shadow, Woodman's manipulation of self and other alludes to the process of photographic masking. Veiling her unidentifiable subjects with a blurred surface-pattern evocative of the seductive patina of the print itself, masking becomes a condition of self-representation.

The resonant, vibrating surface of the patterned boxes disrupts the continuity of the print's surface, as area of energy which becomes more pronounced across the image. In the far left, the pattern has blurred into almost complete indistinction, evocative of a bodily movement which Woodman's arm betrays. Evidence of the artist's own motion during the extended moment of exposure necessary in Woodman's naturally-lit studio, her blurred form invests the moment of the photograph's production with a performative gesture. Unlike the doubling played out through Meatyard's attenuated repetitious act, or Sherman's unfixed fragmented series, Woodman resituated the act of self-doubling in the taking of the shot, re-enacting a principle of repetition rather than using it as a means of representation. Rather than making use of the photographic medium as a serial system through which the multiplicity of selfhood might somehow be portrayed, Woodman instead draws attention to the way in which such a serial potential can only ever function to mask the subject it promises to reveal.

Another shot, made perhaps a little earlier, shows Woodman and her just-dissimilar model in a more intimate pose, their bodies once more manipulated to become each other's double (fig. 5.21). No longer veiled by resonating whorls of patterned paper, these figures are instead masked by the framing of the shot, decapitated by the top edge



slicing across their throats; no longer posed across the wall as a frieze of detached caryatid forms in rhythmic procession, these two female figures slightly overlap each other. Just displaced from the protruding body on the right, the paler, seemingly over-exposed left-hand body becomes her partner's paradoxical, inverted shadow. But this bodily overlap is reproduced in the registration of each figure's outline: in certain areas the silhouette is not only hazy and diffuse, but repeated, suggestive of a juddering movement provoked by a jolt of the camera, or a bodily twitch. More pronounced in the figure on the right, whose shoulders and arms seem to vibrate with a nervous, reverberating hum, the dissolving outline renders a fluctuating presence, a shifting mutability which mimics the fractured lines of the quilt hung on the wall as a backdrop. This quilt, a prop which recurs in many of Woodman's photographs, conceals the studio wall, framing and uniting the two figures. Although dependent on the repetitive process of sewing and the piecing together of disparate bands of cloth, the quilt's composite homogeneity is also inherently fractured, marked by the lines of stitching which draw attention to its internally fragmented structure, the scraps from which it has been put together. In this shot, the quilt's stark black and white contrasts and shallow, geometric surface pattern become the foil for Woodman's staging of her own disrupted outline and fractured, doubled bodies.

But whilst the repeated lines suggest a bodily movement in the moment of exposure, a performative gesture which imbues the resultant print with a vibrant energy, the process of its production points to another cause. The finished positive print's size, at just 4 by 5 inches, suggests it must have been developed through the process of contact printing rather than the displaced method of projected enlargement. Dependent on the intimate sandwiching together of the negative and the surface of the printing paper, the contact process results in finely-detailed prints in which the edges of the frame or the negative's holder are registered precisely, as sharp, clean-cut lines. But unusually, the edges of this print are slightly blurred, registered twice. Whilst lending the print the effect of a body caught in action, the repeated framing edge also points to a performative gesture in the moment of the positive print's exposure. Just displaced, the jittery outlines betray a slight slippage of the negative against the paper, a minute, fractional disconnection forced by Woodman's own hand. Rather than alluding to a mechanistic, alienated

operation of photographic reproduction, Woodman's print draws attention to a personalised moment of hand-crafted production.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps by doing this, by performing her own kind of 'two-step' fragmentation which echoes Krauss' notion of a Surrealist rupturing of the fabric of reality, Woodman splits the photographic moment—both in the bodily motion suggested in the print, and the bodily gesture demanded in its production—fracturing the continuity of the instant of exposure. As Krauss notes, the 'double' sets in motion a one-after-another serial procession that builds duration, both fracturing and attenuating the homogeneity of the photographic sign. The temporality Woodman invokes, the temporality on which the photographic image depends, is produced here as internally riven, a literally 'split' second in which light is registered on the negative, and on the light-sensitive paper of the positive print.

But at the same time as drawing attention to the photograph's status as an image detached from its material referent in the world, the re-enactment of this two-step process also works to fracture the moment of viewing. In that moment, which is necessarily displaced from the moment of the photograph's production, the internal fracturing of the image draws attention to the spectator's own temporal moment of viewing. As Max Kozloff has suggested, the photographic registration of bodily movement as a blurry haze, what he calls a "figural dissolve", whilst tracing the gesture of the original body in space during the instant of the photograph's exposure, also signifies a kind of "live transit at the *viewer's* moment of contact with the image".<sup>72</sup> For just a moment, the 'present' occupied by the viewing subject is activated by the photograph, as the fact of doubled repetition provoked by the blurred outline of the figures, which is here grounded in bodily action and the performative gesture, somehow veils the temporal specificity of the photograph's making.

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<sup>71</sup> As such, Woodman's exposure of a hand-crafted mode of production relates to Hal Foster's gloss of Walter Benjamin's notion of the Surrealist 'outmoded'. See Foster's *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA & London: 1993), pp. 157-191; and Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, (trans. Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter) (London: NLB, 1979), p. 229.

<sup>72</sup> See Max Kozloff's essay 'The Etherealized Figure and the Dream of Wisdom' included in the exhibition catalogue edited by Adam D. Weinberg, Eugenia Parry Janis & Max Kozloff, *Vanishing Presence* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center & New York: Rizzoli, 1989), p. 45 (original emphasis). This show, which took place at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis between 29 January and 16 April



In the moment of viewing, the photograph's temporality is re-activated and re-situated in the present, as it is brought back to life through the investment of the spectator's own subjectivity within that strangely fractured and suspended instant. Whilst the fragmentation of that moment draws attention to the photograph's status as a surface of representation from which the original subject is forever lost, its suspension provides a temporal space in which the viewing subject is interpellated and activated. Like the Steinian moment of the continuous present, in which her manipulation of language produces a temporal disruption in which the ostensible subject of the portrait is lost, the confused temporality provokes an encounter between writer and reader. Although the subject described becomes masked by the writer's language, by provoking a space-time in which she and her reader might meet, Stein's portraits function as another kind of veiled autobiography.

As if opening up the gap between the mask of representation and the lingering shadow of its presumed subject, Stein's space of portraiture becomes a space of interaction, of masked presence and veiled recognition, of difference and recognition, in a way that recalls the photographic moment of encounter staged within Woodman's imagery of repetition and covert self-representation. Woodman's figuration of obscured but intimate, feminine relationships posed within shallow, domesticated interior spaces frame a similarly ambiguous space of encounter, into which the spectatorial subject is drawn in the activated moment of viewing. Via the inherently othered photographic voice, the necessarily third-person viewpoint of the camera mediated by the subsequent position of the voyeuristic spectator, Woodman's project of apparent self-representation is itself veiled. Never simply an autobiographical or diaristic narrative, Woodman's repetitive imagery of 'self' is forever concerned with a self that is veiled through the process of photographic revelation itself. By figuring a masked, displaced subject, Woodman's feminine imagery evokes a general or de-individualised subjectivity, staged in confined domestic spaces that echo the shallow photographic field. Framed by the illuminated frame of the print's surface, the fractured yet suspended moment of interaction conjures the 'potential space' of inter-subjective exchange, a space of resemblance and difference, of encounter and displacement, bringing to mind the processes of continuous negotiation through which subjectivity is forged.

Perhaps then, by fracturing and suspending the photographic moment, Woodman's photographs might offer up such a mediatory surface of exchange. Populated by the representations of inherently othered and objectified selves, Woodman's photographic surfaces become symbolic of what Jessica Benjamin described as the third term, a displaced space of true observation. Imagining such a space in the analytic relationship, Benjamin recognised the need for this intermediary third position, made use of by both analyst and analysand in order that each might "appreciate the other subject as a being outside the self".<sup>73</sup> It is only through the recognition of this difference, then, that the binary 'see-saw' of traditional psychoanalytic conceptions of subjectivity split between the positions of subject and object might be broken down. As Irigaray has pointed out, in a psychoanalytic discourse in which the subject can only ever be masculine, the Other can only exist in a complementary relationship: feminine identity is static, immobilised in its functional position as the reflective surface from which (masculine) subjectivity is bounced back and realised.<sup>74</sup> Benjamin's utopian theory goes some way to provide a strategy of disruption, in which subjects might relate to each other as subjects, rather than remaining forever trapped in a subject-object interaction in which the other is internalised as an object made use of in subject-formation. Disentangled from a binary model of complementary dependency, the feminine subject Benjamin imagines might break out from the immobility of the reflective, reflexive position.

Produced in exchange and encounter, the complex web of feminine subjectivities staged in Woodman's photography evokes such a space of interaction, of recognition and of denial. Echoing Stein's portrayal of an othered subject, one that is insistent but never exactly repeated, existing and endlessly self-creating in the attempted description of the continuous but fractured present, Woodman's own unfixed, effaced and defaced subjects are produced in a similarly engaged moment of simultaneous recognition and denial, identification and deferral. Shifting, mutable presences, masked subjects whose identity is always haunted by the displaced connection to the artist herself, the subjectivities evoked and interpellated in the field of Woodman's photographs dramatise this space of ambiguous encounter.

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Edelson, Duane Michals, Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Lucas Samaras.

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, p. xiii.

<sup>74</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'Any Theory of the 'Subject'', in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, (trans. Gillian C. Gill) (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 134.



Suspended in time, Woodman's doubled and fractured images, like Stein's insistent portraits, function to both conceal and reveal what they promise to uncover or portray. Like the paradoxical nature of the mask itself, hiding what it ostensibly exaggerates as it fetishistically covers over an identity which is never located behind its surface, the insistent doubling Woodman enacts over and over again serves a similarly confused or paradoxical function. By refusing to portray herself in the many examples of her photography which could, perhaps, be simply and superficially interpreted as evidence of a project of self-portraiture, it is maybe only in those shots of 'others' that something about the 'self' can ever be expressed. Woodman's project as a whole, then, a project in which she endlessly disguises herself through her manipulation of effects of the medium itself, could be interpreted as an extensive, inexhaustible project of self-masking.

Woodman's photographic self-representations become her own masks, as by describing her own self from the viewpoint of the othered, third-person position of the camera, and her Others within a solipsistic language defined by a relationship to selfhood and resemblance, sameness and difference are locked in an ambiguous photographic embrace. As Susan Kaiser has pointed out, masks do not simply serve a function of self-disguise, but also importantly "reveal a moment of reflexivity about the otherness within and beyond ourselves".<sup>75</sup> As if embodying a position of clarity, an observational standpoint somehow cast out from the subject position of the self, the space of the mask suspends and frames a metaphorical space of inter-subjective identifications and reciprocal encounter. Both intimately linked to the self, but also othered and inhabited by another subject, the space of the mask conceals and reveals a moment in which subjectivity might emerge. Exposing this space in her staging of fragmented moments of alienated encounter, Woodman's photographs reveal that hidden gap, the Derridean interval of a breath, as a space of communication and subjectivity. Hinting at the displaced, alienated and inter-subjective space of photographic representation itself, Woodman uses her image to replay the process through which selfhood is always deferred, just out of reach, at once intimate and obscure, achingly close and yet utterly distant.

86, 645

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<sup>75</sup> Susan B. Kaiser, in the foreword to Efrat Tseëlon (ed.), *Masquerade and Identities, Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. xiv.

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## Illustrations